THE
MEN WHO WROUGHT

RIDGWELL CULLUM

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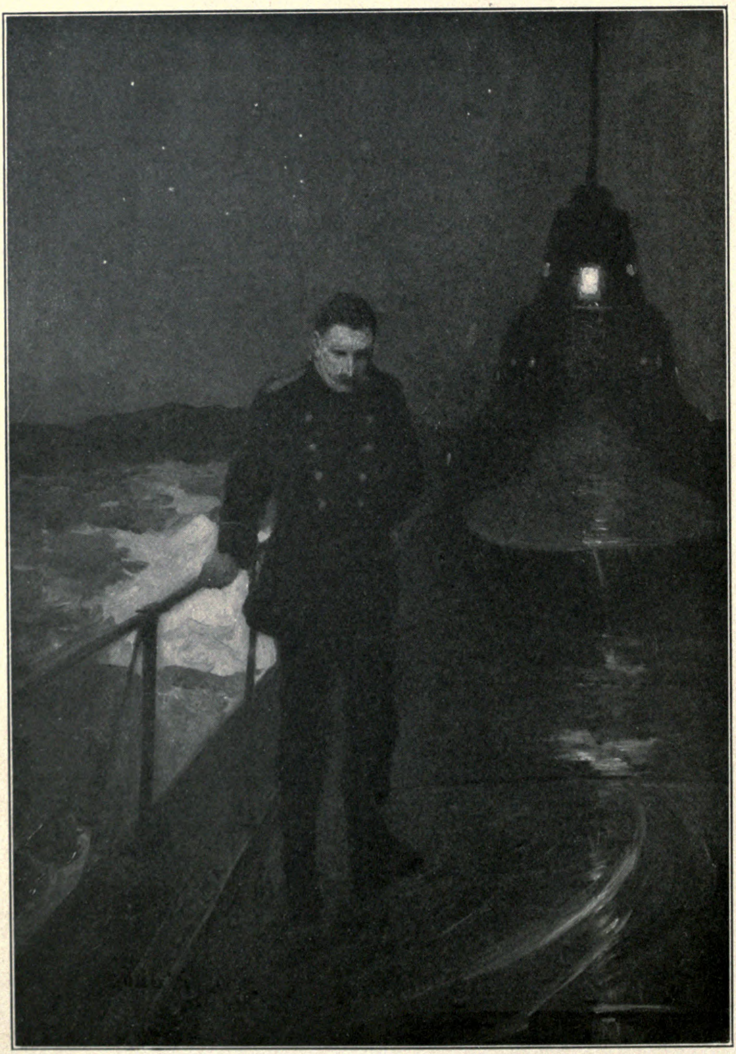
THE MEN WHO WROUGHT

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

The Golden Woman
The Law-Breakers
The Way of the Strong
The Twins of Suffering Creek
The Night-Riders
The One-Way Trail
The Trail of the Axe
The Sheriff of Dyke Hole
The Watchers of the Plains



He Moved a Step Nearer the Steel Rail.

THE
MEN WHO WROUGHT

By

RIDGWELL CULLUM

Author of "The Night Riders," "The Way of the Strong," "The Law Breakers," etc.

PHILADELPHIA
GEORGE W. JACOBS & COMPANY
PUBLISHERS

1916

p418

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THE MEN WHO WROUGHT

CHAPTER I

THE DANGER

"AMONGST the many uncertainties which this deplorable, patched-up peace has brought us, there is, at least, one significant certainty, my boy. It's the inventor. He's buzzing about our heads like a fly in summer-time, and he's just about as—sticky."

Sir Andrew Farlow sighed. His sigh was an expression of relief; relief at the thought that he and his son, dining together at Dorby Towers for the first time since the dissolution of Parliament had released the latter from his political duties, had at last reached the end of a long discussion of the position brought about by the hopelessly patched-up peace, which, for the moment, had suspended the three years of terrible hostilities which had hurled the whole of Europe headlong over the precipice of ruin.

The great ship-owner toyed with the delicate stem of his liquor glass. There was a smile in his keen blue eyes. But it was a smile without lightness of heart to support it.

"Yes, I know. They've been busy enough throughout the war—and to some purpose. Now we have a breathing space they'll spread like a—plague."

Ruxton Farlow sipped his coffee. The weight of the recent discussion was still oppressing him. His mind was full of the appalling threat which the whole world knew to be overshadowing the future.

The dinner was drawing to its close. The butler, grown old in Sir Andrew's service, had finally withdrawn. The great Jacobean dining-hall of Dorby Towers, with its aged oak beams and beautifully carved panelling, was lost in the dim shadows cast by the carefully shaded table lights. Father and son were occupying only the extreme end of the dining-table, which had, at some far-distant age, served to bear the burden of the daily meals of half a hundred monks. There were no other lights in the room, and even the figures of the two diners were only illuminated by the reflected glow from the spotless damask on the table, a fashion to which the conservative habits of the household still ardently clung. It was a fitting setting for such a meeting as the present.

Sir Andrew Farlow, Baronet, was one of the greatest magnates of shipping and ship-building in the country, and was also one of the greatest sufferers by the German submarine warfare during the late war. His extreme wealth, and the fact of the enormous Government contracts in his ship-building yards, had left him practically immune from the consequences of his losses, but the losses to his fleet had been felt by the man, who was, before all things in the world, a shipmaster.

His son, and only partner, had spent those past three years in the service of his country. Not in the actual fighting line but in the work of organization, an important position which his wealth and capacity had entitled him to.

Sir Andrew pierced and lit a cigar.

"We mustn't ridicule them, though," he said, in his hearty Yorkshire way. "We've laughed at 'em too often in the past. It's a laugh which cost our country a couple of thousand millions, and a world-wide suffering which mankind will never forget." Then his manner lightened. "Henceforth the inventor must be to us a rare and precious orchid. We must spend hundreds of thousands of pounds on him, the same as I spend thousands on my orchid houses. I count myself well repaid if I succeed in raising one single perfect bloom on some rare plant. That is, if my rivals have failed with the same plant. The inventor is the orchid of modern civilization, and the perfect blooms he produces are very, very precious and—rare."

"You are thinking of those diabolical engines of destruction which were prepared for this war."

Ruxton helped himself to a cigar.

"On the contrary, I am thinking of the defence, not the offence, of this old country of ours."

The younger man nodded as he lit his cigar.

"That is it. We must prepare—prepare. We have only a breathing space for it."

"There must be no more slumbering."

"And no more sacrificing the country to self-seeking demagogues."

"Yes, and no more slavery to Party prejudices, as antique as the timbers of this house."

"Nor the knaveries of men who seek power through dividing the country into classes, and setting each at the other's throat."

"Nor must we ever again allow the nation's security, economic or military, to be hurled into the cockpit of Party politics."

"Gad! It makes me shiver when I think how near—how near ——"

"We were to destruction," added Sir Andrew gravely.

It was again a moment of intense thought. Each man was regarding from his own view-point that intangible threat inspired by the unsatisfactory termination of the war, which left the Teutonic races in a position to brew further mischief with which to flood the world.

The pucker of thought, the drawn brows, completed the likeness of Sir Andrew Farlow to England's national symbolic figure. His broad shoulders and shortish figure; his round, strong, Yorkshire face, with its crowning of snow-white, curly hair, and the old-fashioned, crisp side whiskers made him a typical John Bull, even in his modern evening dress.

In the case of his son Ruxton it was almost in every respect an antithesis.

No foreigner would have taken Ruxton Farlow for anything but an Englishman, just as no Englishman but would have charged him with possessing foreign blood in his veins. And the Englishman would have been right.

Sir Andrew Farlow had spent a brief married life of a few months over one year with one of the most beautiful women amongst the Russian nobility, and the birth of his son left him a widower.

From his mother young Ruxton had inherited all those characteristics which foreign Europe assigns to the British born; his great size, his fair, waving hair and his darkly serious eyes. These things all came from his Russian mother, who had possessed them herself in a marked degree. Furthermore he inherited other qualities which could never be claimed for his Yorkshire father. The boy from his earliest childhood was an idealist: an idealist of but a single purpose which developed into a brilliant specimen of the modern product of an old-fashioned patriotism.

But he brought more to bear upon his patriotism than the mere passionate devotion to his country. He was a fine product of public school and university with the backing of a keen, well-balanced brain, and a natural aptitude for statecraft in relation to the rest of the world. He saw with eyes wide open to those interests dearest to his heart, and clearly, without one single smudge of the fog of personal self-interest.

"It's never out of my thoughts, Dad," Ruxton said at last. "It is with me at all times. It is the purpose of my life to devote myself to, and associate myself with, only those who will place their country before all else in life."

"An ideal difficult to realize in Great Britain," observed his father drily.

"Do you think that? Do you really think that?"

Sir Andrew stirred impatiently.

"It is not what I think. It is not what any of us think. It is what we see and hear—and *know*. This war has shown up so many weaknesses in the armor of our social economy as well as the psychology of our people that one hardly knows where to hurl one's condemnation the most forcefully. So many weaknesses and failures stand out crying aloud for the bitter castigations of national conscience that it is difficult to point out one worthy feature. Oh, you think that too sweeping," cried the baronet with flushed rugged cheeks and brow, as his son raised questioning eyes in his direction. "That is what every other man and woman in the country would say in their purblind vanity. But it is true. True of the country. True of us all. There is one thing which appeals to me as our greatest failure, however. One failure preëminent over all others that has sunk deep down in my heart, and the scar of which can never be obliterated. I was brought up in the early Victorian days when patriotism was no mere head-line in a sensation-loving press. It was something real. Something big. Something which gripped the sense of duty and made our men and women yearn for active participation when danger threatened our Empire, even to the sacrifice of all they held dear in life. That national spirit was sick to death when this war broke out. Our press was divided, our politicians were divided, and, yes, our people were largely indifferent. But for the strength of a few of our leaders, men who have deserved far better of our country than our country has ever yielded them, thanks to indifference and Party politics, the end of this war would have come with even more terrible consequences to our Empire than all that is signified by the position, almost approaching *in status quo ante*, in which we now find ourselves. The ramifications of our lack of national spirit are so multifarious that it is impossible to go into them as a whole. One or two, however, are so prodigious, and have been so pronouncedly marked, that the veriest optimist has not failed to observe. One which stood out remarkably was the attitude of the reigning Government when war was declared. Every newspaper cried aloud that our ranks had closed up to meet the peril. They did close up, as far as the will of the country was concerned, but our machinery was geared to certain movement, a machine built through years of partizanship in politics. The result was pitiful. When the party in power was faced with Labor troubles which threatened our downfall in the war, they dared not face their task of drastic remedy because they saw in the dim future the loss of votes which would return their opponents to power at the next election. Hence the political crisis, at a time when we could ill afford such crises, and the formation of a coalition. Ten months were thus lost in drifting while Labor played, and our soldiers, inadequately armed, went to their deaths. The press, a divided press, mark you, sought a scapegoat in the individual, when they, no less than our national machinery, were to blame for the disaster. Is such a condition conceivable in a fervent Latin race, or an iron-shod Teuton? No, no. Is it right to blame Labor, who, for the past decade and more, has been coddled and pampered into the belief that like any baby in its cradle it has only to cry loud enough to obtain the alleviating fluid? It at least has cunning enough to realize that its weight of vote in the country is sufficient to control the destiny of the demagogues who seek place and power through its ignorance. Man, but it makes me sweat to think of it. National spirit? Faugh! Look at the manufacturers. Patriotism? They were full of newspaper patriotism until those who were executing Government contracts discovered that their profits were to be limited. The Army? Our voluntary system? The Army was all right. Oh, yes, the Army was great. But the system? The system was probably the most painful among all our national systems. The most hopelessly inadequate. And, from a national spirit view, was hideously grotesque. But the men who joined and shed their blood upon those terrible battle-fields abroad were as the worker in the vineyard who engaged for one penny. They gave their all, and made up in the execution of their duty for those who sheltered behind the skirts of their womenkind, and the race of shopkeepers they left behind. The spirit of our country when the war broke out was a sordid commercial spirit. 'Business as usual' was the cry. Then our press, our wonderful divided press, said the country was not awake. It was slumbering! I tell you it was a lie!" The old man banged his fist upon the table and set the glasses jumping. "Our country was not asleep. Every man, woman, and child capable of common understanding realized our peril from the start. It was the hateful commercial mind seeking to make gain out of the disaster which had overtaken the world, that mind that has acquired for us the detestable sobriquet of 'a race of shopkeepers,' that hindered and deterred us. We were not slumbering. We were awake. Wide awake! To think that I have lived to see the day when our women's fair hands should be called upon to distribute the white feather. Our present-day musicians and our national bards will tell you that the old songs of England are out of date. They are right. Our girls and boys look askance at your Marryats, your Dickenses, your Thackerays, your Stevensons, and all those great masters who found their strength in our country's greatest ages. When war broke out we were floundering in the mire of sensualism brought about by the years of peace and security, and so we bred the cult of the sensualist writers on sex problems, and all the accompaniment of the other arts to match."

The white-haired veteran, who had spent his early youth fighting his country's battles on the Empire's frontiers, and, in later days, had devoted all his energies to the furthering of Britain's supremacy on the seas, passed one strong hand over his lined brow. He swallowed like a man choking back an emotion threatening to overwhelm him. Then the flush died out of his rugged cheeks, and he smiled at the son he loved, and who was his one remaining relative. "Forgive me, my boy, but —but all I've said is true. I don't think many will deny it. Anyway those who do are lying to their own consciences, or—or are purblind in their insane egoism."

Ruxton smiled responsively and thrust back his chair.

"There's no forgiveness needed, Dad," he said. "You have quoted but a few of the hundred signs, of which we all have proof, that when war broke out patriotism had only the smallest possible part in the life of this country. From the beginning to the end of this war England has had to pay out of her coffers, to those of her people whose services she needed, a price so extortionate that one wonders if it is not all some hideous nightmare and in truth unreal. But tell me, Dad," he went on after a pause, "you spoke just now of inventors, and your manner suggested that there was something—important."

Sir Andrew rose from the table and led the way towards the distant folding doors.

"Well, I don't know if it will prove to be anything—worth while."

He fumbled at an inner pocket of his dinner coat, and produced a letter written on thin paper. When they reached the great hall and stood under the brilliant electrolier he unfolded it and held it out for his son's perusal.

"I get lots of them," he said almost apologetically, "and few enough turn out worth while. This one reads a little different. That's all."

"SIR,

"You are a great shipmaster. You owned a fleet of merchant shipping when war broke out of forty-two coastwise and thirty-five ocean-going ships. At the end of the war you owned thirteen coastwise and twenty-one ocean-going traders. I have a means of saving you any such loss by submarine in the future. May I be permitted to show you my invention?

"Truly yours,
"CHARLES SMITH.

"P. S.—Absolute secrecy is necessary. A simple 'yes' addressed by wire to Veevee, London, will be sufficient."

"The wording of it is so unusual that it—interested me," Sir Andrew went on, as Ruxton began to read the letter a second time.

Presently the younger man looked up from his reading.

"That's your imagination working, Dad," he said, smiling. Then he added: "Let it work. Let it run riot. That's what we want in England—now. I should see this man. I think he is a foreigner—in spite of his English name."

The John Bull face of the elder man wreathed into a warm smile as he looked up at his towering son.

"I had decided to," he said quietly.

Ruxton handed him back the letter. Then he moved across to the great mullioned window and looked out upon the perfect summer night. The moon was shining at its full and not a cloud was visible anywhere.

"I have some letters to write, my boy," Sir Andrew went on. "If you want me I shall be in the library. What are you going to do?"

"I think I shall take a stroll along the cliffs. It'll do me good, Dad. I want to feel our beloved Yorkshire cliffs under my feet again, and make sure they're—still there."

Ruxton laughed.

"The General Election is on August 21st, isn't it?" his father enquired presently. "You've got seven weeks in which to recuperate, and get the cobwebs blown off you."

"I always get rid of bad fancies up here in my native air," Ruxton said lightly. "I'm glad we haven't a strenuous campaign."

"No. We shall win all right."

"Win?" Ruxton laughed. "The National Party will sweep the polls. Labor will be opposed to us as Labor will oppose any party. They will always be with us. But even if the extreme Radicals were to link forces with them, they couldn't obtain a twenty-five per cent. representation. No, Dad, whatever the country failed to realize during the first two years of war, it's been all brought home to it now. The English housewife has been driven to a sweeping and garnishing of her home. We've driven her to that, and the National Party is—*going to see she does it thoroughly.*"

The younger man's enthusiasm drew an approving smile from his father. Also a world of pride in this great, fair-haired idealist shone in his eyes.

"Sweep and garnish. That's it, boy," he said ardently. "And what a sweeping, what a garnishing is needed. I wonder. Can it be done?"

"That is what we intend to test. It is to that great effort my colleagues have pledged their lives. I have pledged mine to another. I tell you, Dad, that the sweeping and garnishing isn't sufficient. That is only the moral side of the campaign that lies before us, and without it the other side can never be achieved. But all my future is to be given up to the material security side of the problem. It may be only my dreaming, but I seem to see a terrible threat sweeping up over the eastern horizon. A threat so appalling for us as to make the late war almost insignificant. Some day, if you have the patience to listen to a dreamer, I will tell you of the dread that persistently haunts me. Meanwhile we have that—breathing space."

Without troubling himself to get a hat Ruxton Farlow passed through the entrance hall, out into the brilliant, warm summer night, and strode on towards his destiny.

CHAPTER II

A STRANGE MEETING

THE peace of the night knocked vainly at the heart of the man as he moved along over the grass-grown cart track, which skirted those fields abutting on the pathway marking the broken line of the lofty Yorkshire cliffs.

The warmth of the July air left him utterly forgetful of the light evening clothes in which he was clad, just as the grass-grown track failed to remind him that the shoes he wore had never been intended for country rambles. The soft sea breeze fanned his cheeks, and the bracing air added vigor of body if it left his mental feelings wholly uninspired.

For the time, at least, Ruxton Farlow was living within himself. His mental digestion was devouring hungrily of that force which had come to make his contemporaries realize that here was a man of that unusual calibre which must ultimately make him a leader of men in whatever walk of life he chose for that strenuous journey.

The full moon, shedding a ghostly glory on every hand, yielded him the necessary guidance for his footsteps. It served his purpose, but its beauty for once left him unimpressed. The diamond-studded sky suggested no jewel-bedecked cloak of mysterious night as at other times it was wont to appeal. All romance was dead for the time, as though the shutter of his mental camera had been closed with a slam for the development of the plates within which held those living, grim pictures of the life he felt himself surrounded by on every hand.

He passed the last stile and faced the open sea. That smooth limitless expanse, sighing and restless, as it gently rocked its bosom like some aged crone nursing the infant she was too old to bear herself. He flung himself full length upon a rustling bed of heather. His head was towards the sea, and craning over the very edge of the dizzy cliff. There was no thought in his mind of the dangerous proximity. He had known these cliffs almost from his birth up. They were the friends of his whole life, and their possible latent treachery was unthinkable to him. He propped his face between his two hands and sank his elbows deep into the heather. Then, like some schoolboy, his feet were raised behind him, and crossed, while his eyes searched that mysterious horizon lost in the shadows of a perfect night.

It has been said that Ruxton Farlow was an idealist. But let there be no misapprehension about it. His idealism was practical and full of sanity. He was no visionary. His mind was ever groping for the material welfare of his country. The moral welfare, he felt, should be in hands far more capable in that direction than his life and learning had made his. It had been his habit of life to feed his mind upon hard and incontrovertible facts which bore upon the goal of his ideals. He accepted nothing which was merely backed by academic logic. He demanded the logic of practice. Theory was impossible to him, unless that theory was demonstrated in practice. Thus it was he kept his mind alert for facts—and again facts.

The facts which concerned him at the moment were many, and he found in them all, when arranged in due order, one stream like some rushing river which raced on its tempestuous way to the wide sea of disaster beyond.

The starting-point of his facts was the truth that no modern combination of force, however superlative its effort, could crush out of international existence the power of two peoples with aggregate populations of virile strength of some hundred and odd million souls. The war had proved that. And the only possible peace resulting from it had added the conviction that, from a peace point of view, the war had proved utterly useless and damaging. Besides the enormous expenditure of treasure and the vast sacrifices of human life, it had given the world a nominal peace backed by an aggravation of international hatred and spleen a thousand times greater than had ever been known in history since the days of bare-limbed savagery.

What then was the outlook? The man stirred with that nervous suggestion of a disturbed mind. War—war! On every hand war—again. Once again all the moral development of the human race towards those higher planes of light, learning, and religious ideals was shadowed by the spectre which during the last three years had flung men back to the shadows of an ancient savagery and barbarism.

The savage mind of the Teuton had broken out into a fierce conflagration of barbarism. Again it would smoulder, like some slumbering volcano, only to break out again when the arrogance of the German heart told it that the time was ripe to avenge the indignity of its earlier failure.

Ruxton Farlow accepted this as his basis of fact, and followed the river down its turbulent course towards that sea of disaster which he already saw looming ahead. It required no imagination. The course was a straight one, straight as the crow flies. For that passion of hatred which inspired the flood brooked no obstruction to its course. It clamored for its goal and swept all side issues out of its path. Great Britain lay in that sea beyond. Great Britain, who, in German eyes, owned the earth, and incidentally had snatched even those inadequate colonies from her bosom, which, through long years of diplomatic trickery, she had contrived to acquire. The Prussian passion for conquest had been changed through the late war to the passionate national hatred of the German people against Great Britain. This was clear. So clear that the light which shone upon it was painful to his mental vision.

What then was the resulting position of the country he loved? The lessons of the war were many—so many. Yet preëminently outstanding was one fact which smothered all others in its significance, and reduced them all almost to nothingness. His father had dwelt upon the lack of national spirit when war broke out. That had been remedied. The country had changed during those three years of suffering and sacrifice. No, his father had missed the great lesson. Yet it was so simple—so simple.

The man raised his head higher, and folded his arms under him as a support. He gazed down at the calm summer moonlit sea. So calm, so peaceful, so—seductive to the straining mind.

He began to realize the yearning of the suicide for the peace beyond life. How easy to solve all problems. How easy to rid oneself of the duties, the harassing, cruel duties imposed by the Creator of all life. The soft murmur of the breaking swell upon the beach below. One plunge beneath that shimmering surface and—nothing. In that instant there flashed through his mind a memory of just such another sea. The perfect summer sea. The great ship, one of the wonders of the age. A stealing trail of foam across the glass-like surface. An explosion. Then fifteen hundred souls solve the problem of that—nothing! Ah, that was it. That was the Danger. He knew. Every thinking human being knew that if Germany had begun war with a fleet of some three or four hundred submarines, three weeks would have terminated the war so far as Britain was concerned.

He moved over on to his side, and his movement was a further expression of nervous tension. He propped his head upon one hand with his eyes fixed on the vague horizon beyond which the Teutonic giant was peacefully slumbering, and his thought was spoken aloud.

"Is he slumbering?" he asked of the sea. "Is he? Will he ever sleep again? No, I think not. Not at least while there is a chance that his intelligence behind the machine can render an island home untenable."

"Night claims from the overburdened soul the truth which daylight is denied."

Ruxton Farlow sat up with a jolt. His dark, searching eyes were turned from the sea. They were turned in the direction whence the voice, which had answered him, had proceeded. In the brilliant moonlight he saw the outline of a figure standing upon the footpath which ran parallel to the coast-line. The figure was not quite distinct, but it was clearly a woman's, which corroborated the conviction he had received at the sound of the voice.

"But for once she has betrayed her—trust," he said, and a feeling of irritation swept over him that he had permitted himself to respond to the challenge of this stranger, who was probably something in the nature of one of life's vagrants, wandering homeless over the deserted ways of the countryside.

Then he discovered to his further annoyance that his response had brought forth its logical result. The figure was moving towards him, and as it drew near he became aware of that delightful feminine rustle which no man ever yet found unseductive.

The woman made no verbal reply until she was standing before him. Ruxton was still sitting on the heather, but his eyes were wide with astonished admiration, and his clean-shaven lips were parted, which added to his whole expression of incredulous amazement.

The woman standing before him was no vagrant, unless a vagrant could possess a queenly presence, and an attire which suggested the best efforts of London or Paris. He stared, stared as might some schoolboy budding into manhood at the sight of a perfect womanhood. Then, in a moment, questions raced through his head. Who was she, and where—where did she come from? What freak of fortune had set her wandering those cliffs alone —and at night?

She was beautifully tall and crowned with a royal wealth of hair which remained hatless. Its color was not certain in the moonlight, but Ruxton felt that it must be red-gold. He could think of no other color which could match such a presence. Her figure, sharply outlined in the moonlight, was superb. It suggested all he had ever seen in those ardent dreams of youth. Her face possessed something of the reflected glory of the moon lit by eyes whose color was hidden from him, but which shone like great dull jewels full of a living fire.

All these things he realized in one swift comprehensive glance. But in another moment his whole attention was absorbed by the rich voice, the tones of which were like the softest music of some foreign southern land.

"It is scarcely fair to blame the night," she said, in smiling protest.

All unprepared for the encounter Ruxton had nothing but a stupid monosyllable to offer.

"No," he said, and a sigh somehow escaped him.

Then, in a moment, the blood was set swiftly pulsating through his veins.

"May I sit down?" the woman enquired. "I have had a long walk, and am a little tired," she added in explanation.

But she waited for no permission. And somehow Ruxton felt that her expression of weariness was far below the mark. She appeared quite exhausted.

"You are more than a *little* tired," he said, with urgent solicitude.

Now that her face was nearer to his level he could see that she was indeed very, very beautiful. Her eyes were large and almost oriental in their shape. Her cheeks were as delicate as the petals of a lily. The contour of her whole face was a perfect oval with just sufficient lengthening to give it character.

She did not deny him. But a smile lit her eyes.

"This is delicious," she said, with a sigh of content, turning her face towards the sea, and drinking in deep draughts of fresh, salt air.

Ruxton endeavored to gather his faculties, which had been completely scattered by the thrilling shock of the encounter. He felt himself to be like a callow youth of seventeen rather than a man of over thirty-five, a man whose public life had made intercourse with women of society a matter of every day.

"You have had a long walk?" he enquired wonderingly. "But at night? On these cliffs? You are ten miles from Dorby, and there is no habitation between—except Dorby Towers. Beyond this there is a village or two, but no railway for miles." He had made up his mind that she did not belong to this district. Her costume was still in his thoughts.

"I did not come from Dorby. Nor from any of those villages. Still, I have had a long walk. I have been on my feet nearly three hours."

As she offered no further explanation Ruxton urged her.

"Will you not explain—more?"

"Is it needed?"

The woman faced round, and her Eastern eyes were smiling frankly into his.

Ruxton had no alternative. He desired none. The situation had suddenly gripped him. He was caught in its toils, and delighted that it was so. This woman's beauty, her frank unconventionality, were wholly charming. He asked nothing better than that she should satisfy her whim, and sit there, beside him, talking—talking of what she pleased so long as he listened to the rich music in her voice, and could watch the play of her beautiful, mobile features.

"No," he said deliberately. "There is no need." Then he made a comprehensive gesture with one hand. "The night is beautiful, it is a night of romance and adventure. Let us forget there are such things as conventionality, and just—talk. Let us talk as this silver night prompts. Let us try and forget that painful thought which daylight brings us all. As you say, the night is the time of truth, while daylight demands the subterfuge which conceals it."

But the woman did not respond to his invitation. A little pucker of sudden distress marred her brows.

"Conventionality. I had forgotten," she said. Then her manner became suddenly earnest. She leant slightly forward, and her shining eyes warned Ruxton of the genuineness of their appeal. "Yes, I had truly forgotten," she went on. "Will you—will you forget for the moment there is the difference of sex between us? Will you forget that I am a woman who has wilfully thrust her presence upon a man, a stranger, and laid herself open to a dreadful interpretation of her actions? Will you simply regard me as some one who is striving to unravel those tangled skeins, which, just now, seem to be enveloping a helpless humanity, and, in her effort, has sought out the only man whom she feels can help her—Mr. Ruxton Farlow, the man who will one day rise to be a great ruler in his country?"

"You sought me out?" enquired Ruxton, ignoring the tribute so frankly spoken.

"That is why I have been on my feet for three hours. Will you do as I have asked?"

The charm of this beautiful creature was greater than the man knew. The situation, as she put it, was wholly impossible. Yet her fascination was such that he was impelled to hold out his hand.

"For the time, at least, we are comrades in a common cause," he said, smiling. "My hand on it."

The woman laid a white-gloved hand in his, and the thought in the man's mind was regret at the necessity for gloves.

Ruxton stretched himself out on the heather again. This time he was on his side, supporting his head upon his hand and facing her. The moon was shining full down upon her uncovered hair, and illuminating the perfect features which held the man's gaze.

"And now for the tangled skein," he said with attempted lightness, while his eyes lit whimsically.

"Ruxton Farlow doesn't need a woman to point the dreadful tangle in which humanity is involved—just now. He knows more of the threads than perhaps any man of his country. He was thinking of them when he was run to earth here upon this scented waste of Nature's riot. He was probably pulling apart the wretched threads himself, seeking hope in his endeavor, hope for the future, hope for the future of this land we both love, and for its people. Doubtless he, as others, has found the task something more than arduous, and no doubt he has searched the scene that lies below him, yearning for that peace of mind which oblivion has yielded in recent days to so many souls which have passed beneath the shining surface which encircles this iron-bound coast."

Ruxton's eyes devoured the entrancing animation which accompanied the words. An added amazement had leapt within him. She had fathomed his secret feelings as his eyes had searched the surface of the shimmering summer sea. Her understanding was even more uncanny than had been her sudden apparition. Who was she? he kept reiterating to himself. Who? And where did she come from?

"I felt all that," he found himself saying.

"I know. I have felt it all, too. But your feeling had no inspiration in cowardice. It is the mind of the imaginative that sees an exaggeration in all that offends the sensibilities. It is the mind that distorts with painful fancy the threat which has not yet fallen. It is the mind which is inspired by a heart strong with hope, which in its turn owes its inspiration to a spirit possessed of a great power to do. Of such spirit are the leaders of men. Their mental agony is theirs alone, they suffer and do for those others who do not possess power to do for themselves."

The woman's eyes were turned upon the distant horizon again. Their gaze was introspective, and she talked as she thought, regardless for the time of the man beside her.

But he was more mindful. No word of hers was lost upon him. He was marvelling at her depth of understanding, he was marvelling at her simplicity of expression. And, through it all, he was noting and endeavoring to place that suggestion of foreign intonation in her perfect English accent. More and more was this splendid creature becoming an enigma. More and more was he becoming absorbed in her, and more surely was his promise of simple comradeship becoming an impossibility.

"And the threat—which inspires these phantasms?" he said, as the musical tones ceased, and the murmur of the sea came up to them in their eyrie.

"It is a reality."

Ruxton stirred. He sat up once more, and his gaze, for the moment, left the beautiful profile, and wandered towards the eastern horizon.

"I know," he said simply.

"I have seen," came the impressive rejoinder.

Ruxton's eyes came back to the woman's face.

"Will you tell me?"

His request was made without a shadow of excitement. That was his way when confronted with a crisis. Now he understood why she had worn herself to weariness for three hours on her feet. But for all the interest of the moment his mind was still questioning—Who?

"The telling would be worthless. It would convey simply—words. There is better than telling."

"But the world is at peace now," Ruxton suggested.

"It was at peace before, when—the telling came from all ends of the world."

"And no one listened."

"Those who could have helped refused to hear. And those who heard were powerless."

"So now you come ——?"

"To one who, eschewing all that his wealth and position could give him of life's leisure and delight, has dedicated his whole future to the land I—have learned to love."

"And what would you have me do?" Ruxton was smiling, but behind his smile was a brain searching and hungry.

"Do? Ah, that is it." The woman turned swiftly. All her calm had been caught up in a hot emotion. Her eyes were wide and shining as she leant towards him and searched his fair face and dark eyes. "There is peace as you said. But it is only words written upon paper with ink that is manufactured, and by a pen also manufactured. The whole peace is only manufactured. There is no peace in the hearts of the leaders of nations, only hate, which has inspired a passionate yearning for revenge, a passion which has intensified a thousandfold all effort towards the destruction of the hated. Need I tell you of the Teuton feelings? Ruined, blasted as has been that great machine, both military and industrial, there is still the Teuton mind ready and yearning for such a revenge as will stagger all conscious life. Well may the sensitive imagination distort and magnify the threat that cannot yet be grasped. Well may the straining mind contemplate with ecstasy the oblivion gained by those poor creatures on the *Lusitania*. But for those who would learn, and know, and see, there is a better, braver death to die than the bosom of the ocean can offer. I tell you there is work for every true Briton, man and woman. Work that can offer little else than the reward of a conscience that, maybe, is rendered easy in death. The men who would lead Britain must be men with eyes, and ears, and mind wide open. The time has gone by when England's politicians may sit down in luxurious offices and enjoy the liberal salaries this country so generously dispenses. They must learn first hand of the dangers which threaten these impregnable shores. Impregnable? That has been the fetish which has been the ruin of Britain's national spirit. But I tell you, as surely as the sun will rise to-morrow I can prove to you that impregnability can never again be applied to these splendid shores. Remember, these are the days when victories and destruction are wrought by thought in peace time. The days of simple brute strength have died for all time. And that is why I have travelled far to seek Ruxton Farlow."

"You have sought me to tell me all this that I have thought for months. That I have felt. That in my heart I have known as surely as that night follows day. You have sought *me*," he added reflectively.

The stranger leant still further towards him, and the man thrilled at the contiguity. So close was she that her breath fanned his cheek, and he found himself gazing into the eager, beautiful eyes.

"And have I not done right? Have I not done right to come to you, who have felt, and thought, and known these things for months—if I can show you even more than in your worst moments you have ever dreamed of?"

It was an intense moment. Its intensity for the man was well-nigh overpowering. Was this wonderful creature some brilliant siren luring him to destruction for very wantonness, or in the interest of others? Was she just as she represented, just an ardent patriot, to whom chance had revealed some damaging secret of his country's enemies, or was she merely a woman endowed with superlative beauty exercising her attraction in those enemies' interests? These things flashed through his brain, even as those feelings of sex stirred his blood and made for denial. For a moment the mental side of him rose dominant.

"You are a foreigner," he challenged, in a voice he hardly recognized as his own.

"I am a Pole."

The admission came promptly.

"You speak English—perfectly," he persisted in the same voice.

"I am—glad."

"Where were you—during the war?"

"In England."

The questions and answers flew back and forth without a semblance of hesitation.

"Yes, yes." Then the man mused. "There were thousands of foreigners at large in England—then."

"But not all were—spies."

The man lowered his eyes. A flush stole up to his brow. It was a flush of shame.

"I—I beg your pardon," he said. The mind had yielded to the man.

"Why should you? Your country should be first in your thoughts. You have not hurt me."

Ruxton passed one hand across his broad, fair forehead.

"But you—a Pole. It seems ——"

"It seems that I must have some motive other than I have stated. I have." A bitter laugh accompanied the admission. Quite suddenly she threw her arms wide in a dramatic gesture. "Look at me," she cried. "You see a Pole, but before all things you see a woman. Give riot to your heart, and leave your head for other things. Then you will understand my motives. I have lived through centuries of horror during that terrible war. A horror that even you, who know the horrors committed, will never be able to understand. The innocent women and children in Belgium and France, and my own country, on your own shores, on the high seas. O God," she buried her face in her hands. Then, in a moment, she looked up. "Think—think, if at some future time the Teuton demons overrun this beautiful land I love. The past, those horrors of which I have spoken are nothing to that which will be committed here in England. Now do you understand? Now—will you let me show you what —I can show you?"

"I think I understand—now."

"And you will grant my request?" The urgency was intense. But in a moment the woman went on in a changed tone. A soft smile accompanied her next words. "But no. Don't answer now. It would not be fair to yourself. It would not be fair to your country. It would even deny all that I believe of you. Keep your answer. You will give it to me—later. I will not let you forget. Now I must go."

She rose to her feet, and Ruxton watched her with stirring feelings as she occupied herself with that truly feminine process of smoothing out the creases of the costume which had suffered by contact with the heather.

At last she held out her white-gloved hand, and Ruxton sprang to his feet. He realized that she was about to vanish out of his life as swiftly and mysteriously as she had entered it.

"You are going?" he said quickly.

"Yes. But you will be reminded."

The man held the gloved hand a shade longer than was necessary.

"But on these cliffs? Alone?" Somehow her going had become impossible to him.

But the woman laughed easily.

"It will be only a few moments on these cliffs. It is nothing. Remember I have been wandering about for three hours—alone."

"But—Good-bye!"

The man made his farewell regretfully. He had been about to ask her how, with ten miles to Dorby, and a considerable distance to other villages, she would only be on the cliffs a few moments. But he felt that her coming and her going were her secret, and he had no right to pry into it—yet.

"Good-bye."

The woman turned away, but was promptly arrested by a swift question.

"May I not know your name?"

The stranger faced him once more, and her smile lit up her radiant features till Ruxton felt that never in his life had he seen anything to equal her beauty.

"My name? Yes—why not? It is Vladimir. Vita Vladimir."

Then, in a moment, the man stood gazing after her, as the brilliant moonlight outlined the perfect symmetry of her receding figure.

CHAPTER III

THE MYSTERY

RUXTON FARLOW'S return home was even more preoccupied than had been his going. An entirely new sensation was stirring within him. Before, his thoughts had been flowing along the troubled channel of affairs, all of which bore solely upon the purpose of his life. Now their flow had been further confused by the addition of an emotion, which, under ordinary circumstances, might well have leavened the most gloomy forebodings. Instead, however, it was rather like an artist engaged on painting a picture of tragic significance who suddenly discovers that another hand has added some detail, which, while it is still a part of the subject portrayed, yet renders the whole a masterpiece of incongruity.

The coming of a woman into the affairs of his life seemed to him as incongruous as it was pleasant, and, in the circumstances, justified. It was an element all unconsidered before. His association with women until now had been the simple parrying of the feminine shafts levelled at him in the process of ordinary social intercourse in the position he occupied in life. He was by no means a man who took no delight in women's society. On the contrary. But his purpose in life had always been too big as yet to permit his dwelling upon those pleasures which no real manhood can ever ignore.

Women were to him part of the most exalted side of a man's life. His ideals in that direction were as wholly unworldly as his ideals were practical in every other direction. From his earliest youth, due to the death of his mother at his birth, he had never experienced a woman's influence upon his life, and thus he had been left to the riot of imagination, which, in very truth, had been his safeguarding against the operation of the matrimonial market of social London in the midst of which he had found himself plunged.

Now, under conditions wholly robbed of every convention, he had suddenly been confronted by a wonderful creature, who, to his vivid imagination, appealed as the most beautiful of all her beautiful sex. Furthermore the contact had been brought about through those very ideals and purposes to which he had devoted his life. And, moreover, the wonder of it all was that his purpose was apparently her purpose, and she had sought him because this was so. Herein lay the extraordinary incongruity of a sex attraction brought about by the threatened tragedy overshadowing them all.

Vita Vladimir!

It was a name such as he might have discovered anywhere amongst the foreign colony in Soho. His attraction towards the woman afforded no glamor to the name. None at all. He told himself frankly it did not fit her. Furthermore it left him unconvinced that it truly belonged to her. Yet she said she was a Pole. And somewhere in the back cells of memory there was a sort of hazy recollection that "Vladimir" had some connection with Polish history.

However, the question of her name left him cold. Only the vivid picture of her personality remained in his mind. Her charm, her ardor, her beauty, and that extraordinary suggestion of mystery, conveyed in her costume, and the evasion of the details of her coming and going—these things had caught the imagination and the youth in him, and acted upon them like champagne.

He strove to thrust aside these things and consider her only through the purpose on which she had sought him out. She knew, and had seen, the realities of the threat which he believed to be hanging over his country. She could, and would, show him these things.

Suddenly on the impulse of a reasonable incredulity he asked himself if he were dreaming. The whole thing must be a mere phantasm, the outcome of all the troubled thought which had occupied him for so long. But she had told him he would hear from her again, and then that tiny white-gloved hand. He felt its clasp now, as it had lain in his strong palm. No, it was no dream. She was real—and she was very, very beautiful.

By the time he reached the great colonnade which formed the entrance porch of his home the woman's personality had dominated all his endeavor to regard the incident from any other point of view. The woman had absorbed all that was in him, and a curious, deep, thrilling sensation of delight at the encounter had completely thrust into the background the purpose which had brought it about. All that which we in our consideration of the affairs of life are apt to despise, and even leave out of our reckoning altogether, had asserted itself. It was the sex instinct, which no power of human mentality can resist.

Ruxton had no wish to meet his father again that night. He wanted solitude. He wanted to think and dream, as all youth desires to think and dream, when the floodgates of sex are opened, and it finds itself caught in the first rush of its tide.

Glancing at his watch he discovered it to be close upon midnight. But the hour had no significance in his present mood. His father would have retired, and the library would be empty, so he passed up the oak stairway with the determination to smoke a final cigar, and let his thoughts riot over the delectable banquet the evening had provided for them.

But that particular pleasure was definitely denied him. When he entered the library the lights were still on, and he beheld his father's curly white head still bent over the table at which he was wont to attend to his private correspondence.

The old man looked up as the other walked down the long book-lined room towards him. His deep-set eyes were smiling as they were ever ready to smile upon the companion of his wifeless life.

"Finished your ramble?" he enquired pleasantly.

Ruxton returned the smile and flung himself upon a long old settle before he replied.

"The ramble is finished," he said, preparing to light a cigar.

Their eyes met. The father knew there remained something as yet unspoken behind the reply. He waited. But Ruxton's decision was not yet taken.

"Finished your letters yet?" he enquired from behind a cloud of smoke.

The bright blue eyes surveying him twinkled.

"One more," his father said.

"Go ahead then."

Sir Andrew knew by the tone that ultimately the unspoken word was to come. He glanced down at his papers with a sigh.

"I believe, after all, I shall have to break with some of my old-fashioned habits. It is an awful thing to contemplate at my time of life. I think I must be getting old. The burden of private correspondence begins to weigh. I have always held that a private secretary for such a purpose is waste of money, and the undesirable admission of another into one's private life."

Ruxton stretched out his long legs. His bulk almost completely filled the settle.

"It's hard work for Yorkshire to change its habit. A feature applying pretty generally to the Briton. I only wonder a man of your vast fortune has clung to such habits so long. I, who possess but a twentieth of the fortune you possess, find I cannot do without one."

"But then you are a political man," his father smiled drily.

Ruxton nodded. "And in consequence I am saved much heartburning."

"Yes." Sir Andrew gathered up a sheaf of sealed envelopes and flung them into his post basket. "Twenty-five letters. Answers to cranks. Answers to those philanthropists who love to do good with other folks' money. Answers to beggars, to would-be blackmailers, to public institutions whose chief asset is a carefully compiled list of likely subscribers, and then—those whom we have decided to encourage—the inventors. Here is our friend Charles Smith." He picked up the last letter remaining to be dealt with. "What am I going to say to him?"

The old man scratched one shaggy eyebrow with the point of his penholder—one of his signs of doubt and perplexity.

"This secrecy business adds importance to the reply," he added.

Ruxton held out his hand.

"Let's read it again," he said.

His father passed the letter across, and sat watching the concentrated brows of his son, while the latter reperused the contents.

The watching man was about to turn back to his desk when his eyes abruptly widened questioningly. Ruxton had suddenly sat bolt upright, and a quick flush of suppressed excitement spread over his strong expressive features.

"Veevee, London!" he exclaimed. "A code address which is obviously a word made out of initial letters. V. V." Then he looked across at his startled parent. "I say, Dad, there's mystery here all right—mystery everywhere to-night. V. V. Those initials fit Vita Vladimir exactly."

"Precisely. Also Vivian Vansittart," smiled his father. "Or any other high-sounding names beginning with V."

Ruxton passed the letter back with a laugh. Then he flung himself back on the settle.

"Wait until I have told you what happened to me to-night. Then write to that man and give him a definite appointment at some time when you can devote several hours to him—if necessary."

Sir Andrew pushed his high-backed chair well away from the desk and helped himself to a cigar.

"This is one more than I have any right to to-night, Rux," he said, as he crossed his stout legs, "but go ahead."

Ruxton seemed in no hurry to begin his story. The truth was he felt reluctant to let any one share his secret. Furthermore he was doubtful, in the light of cold words, if that which he had to tell would carry the conviction which possessed him. It seemed impossible; and then the personality of Vita. No. But he felt that the story must be told, if only in justification of his demand for Mr. Charles Smith.

"Look here, Dad," he began at last. "I know you regard me as a bit of a dreamer, but on more than one occasion you have been pleased to say you consider my judgment pretty sound. Perhaps it is. I don't know. Maybe to-night I have been unduly affected by feelings which don't usually carry me away; but, even so, I think I have retained sufficient of our Yorkshire phlegm to get a right estimate of things, and the things which have happened to-night I am convinced are connected with the V. V. in that letter. I was on the cliffs, lying on the heather, looking out to sea, when a woman came along who had been endeavoring to hunt me out for three hours. She was the most beautiful creature I have ever seen. She does not belong to Dorby, or the neighborhood. She was dressed to perfection, and was hatless, and her name was Vita Vladimir. I tell you these details because they are all significant, and I want you to understand that first."

"Go on," his father nodded.

"Go on?" Ruxton gave a short laugh. "It's easier to say than to do—adequately. Anyway this is the whole story."

Both men's cigars had been entirely consumed by the time Ruxton Farlow had finished his long recital. He told his story of his meeting with Vita Vladimir with all the simple force which was part of the Russian nature in him. And, in spite of his fears to the contrary, none of its dramatic significance was lost in the telling.

His father read in the story all his son wanted him to read. But he read deeper even than that, and the depth of his reading was a trespass upon the ground which Ruxton fondly believed he had kept to himself. The shrewd Yorkshire mind probed deep to the vivid impression this Vita Vladimir had made upon his only son, and as yet he was not sure that he shared the boy's enthusiasm. However, long years of understanding had convinced him of Ruxton's clarity of judgment in vital matters, and his earnest recital of the woman's warning and promises carried the conviction that, in spite of the boy's attraction, his judgment in this matter had remained unimpaired. He accepted the facts, but, to himself, deplored the means by which they had been conveyed.

"It is quite remarkable, boy, quite remarkable," was his only comment at the conclusion of the story. Then he held the man Smith's letter in his hand and glanced at the postscript.

But Ruxton was not satisfied with such comment. He was anxious that his hard-headed father should see eye to eye with him.

"But what do you think of it?" he demanded, with suppressed feeling.

The great ship-owner took some moments formulating his reply.

"One's impression from your telling is the honesty of the woman," he said deliberately at last. "There are three possibilities in the matter. First that she is honest. Second that she—belongs to our enemies. Third that she is a—crank. But the second and third I think can be dismissed. Why should our enemies make such an extraordinary proposal to you, or to anybody, short of a man important enough to be done away with? The suggestion of 'crank' is quite dispensable, in view of the significance of the story as it bears on all the possibilities of the future we have discussed. Accepting her honesty, I should say that the answer to this letter will be received by her for—transmission. Well?"

"Then answer that letter in the affirmative, and see this Charles Smith, Dad," cried Ruxton, rising and pacing the floor. "I am going to probe this matter to the bottom." Then he came to a halt before the desk, and gazed down into his father's serious eyes. "There is mystery abroad, Dad. There is more than mystery. There is something tangible. A great and threatening danger which must be nullified. We don't know what it is yet. We can only surmise, but surmise is futile. We must go and find out, as she said. We must learn these things first hand. I shall go."

"That is what I felt you had—decided." The old man sighed. "I can't disguise my regret, my boy, but it is—in the light of your life's purpose—your duty to go. I will do my part. I will see this—Charles Smith."

The General Election had come and gone like a hurricane of emotion sweeping the country from one end to the other. Passionate opinion had been stirred, it had been brought to a feverish surface and had been hurled from lip to lip in that spirit of contention, than which no more bitter feeling can be roused in the affairs of modern life. For once, however, Britain was far less divided than usual. Even prejudice, that blind, unreasoning, unthinking prejudice which usually characterizes the voter, who claims for himself "good citizenship," had somehow been shaken to its foundations. It was an almost awakened Britain which marched on the polls and registered its adhesion and support to the men who, out of the muckhole of demagoguery, had risen superior even to themselves and yielded to the real needs of the country.

And the voice of the new Britain had been heard like a clarion across the Empire, so that, at the close of the polls, the world knew that, as Ruxton Farlow had said, the British housewife had determined upon that sweeping and garnishing so sadly needed, and that once and for all she had decided to bolt and bar the back door through which for so long she had been assailed by her enemies.

Ruxton Farlow was on his way to his little old Georgian house in Smith Square, Westminster. He was returning from Downing Street, where he had been summoned hastily and urgently by the new Prime Minister. He had found that electrical individual busily engaged in superintending the removal of his effects, aided by his equally energetic secretary, from one house in Downing Street to that Mecca of all political aspirations, "No. 10."

Ruxton had avoided the vehicles and packing-cases at the door and was conducted to the great little man's library. And on his entry the secretary had been promptly dismissed. The interview was brief. It was so brief that Ruxton, who understood and preferred such methods, was not a little disconcerted. There had been a hearty hand-shake, a few swiftly spoken compliments and a quick assurance, and once more the big man found himself picking his way amongst the debris on the doorsteps.

But this time he had scarcely seen the obstructions he had to avoid. He dodged them almost mechanically. His heart was beating high with a quiet exultation, for he had left the presence of the wonderful little man, who seemed to live his whole life on the edge of his nervous system, with the assurance of a junior Cabinet rank in the new Ministry.

But the first rush of his tumultuous feelings quickly subsided, as was his way, and he remembered that which was at once his duty and desire. So he turned into a post-office and despatched a code wire to his father in Yorkshire that he might be the first person in the world to learn of his early triumph. Yes, he wanted his to be the first congratulations. He smiled to himself as he left the post-office. The entire press had been devoting itself to forecasting the personnel of the new Cabinet, but not in one single instance had his name been included in the lists.

It was with a sense bordering on perfect delight that he turned into the calm backwater of Smith Square. And for once the dingy atmosphere took on a reflected glory from his feelings. The square church, with its four squat towers, handsome enough in its architecture but drab of hue, might have been some structure of Gothic splendor. Even the impoverished trees which surrounded it had something of the verdant splendor of spring in them on this late summer afternoon. The sparrows and the pigeons failed even to bring home to him the greyness of life in a London square. For the moment those mental anxieties which had haunted him ever since the Great War were powerless to depress his outlook. Life was very good—very good indeed.

He crossed the square and let himself into his house with a latch-key. He crossed the panelled hall and flung his hat and cane upon a table and hurried up the stairway to his study. He had been interrupted in his correspondence by the Prime Minister's summons, and now he was anxious to be done with it, and be free to contemplate the new situation in the light of those many purposes he had in view.

As he sat down at his desk the door in the oak panelling at the far end of the room was thrust open and his secretary appeared. In a few moments these two were absorbed in their work with a thoroughness which was characteristic of Ruxton. Thus for two hours and more the memory of his promotion was completely thrust into the background.

The butler had just brought him in a tray of afternoon tea, and the two men took the opportunity to abandon their work for a few minutes' leisure.

Ruxton leant back in his chair and lit a cigar, while the secretary lit a cigarette and poured out the tea.

" Our labors have borne fruit, Heathcote," said Ruxton, seizing the moment to impart his good news. " We are raised from the rank and file. Our future lies on the front benches."

" The Cabinet ? "

" Yes, the Cabinet."

Nor could Ruxton quite control the delight surging through him.

"Now we begin to see the development of all those long-laid plans we have so ceaselessly worked upon, Heathcote," he went on. "Now we are getting nearer to the position which will enable us to bring about something of that security for this old country for which we both so ardently long. Now—Heathcote—now!"

There was a passionate triumph underlying the idealist's words which found ample reflection in the dark eyes of the keen-faced secretary.

The Honorable Harold Heathcote, a younger son in an old English family, had been Ruxton's secretary from the beginning of his political career; he was a brilliant youngster who had determined upon a political career for himself, and had, with considerable shrewdness, pinned his faith to the banner which, from the beginning of his career, Ruxton Farlow had unfurled for himself. These two men were working for a common purpose.

"I knew it would come, Mr. Farlow," said Heathcote with cordial enthusiasm. "And there'll be more to follow, or I have no understanding of the times. I am glad. Very glad."

At that moment there was a knock at the door, and Heathcote rose to answer it. When he returned he handed two telegrams to his chief.

"Telegrams," he said laconically, and returned to his seat and to his tea.

Ruxton ran a paper knife through the envelopes. The first message was from his father. It was brief, cordial, but urgent.

"Heartiest congratulations. Immensely delighted. Must see you at once. Inventor turned out most important as well as mysterious.—FARLOW."

Ruxton read the message over two or three times. Then he deliberately tore it up into small pieces and dropped it in the waste-paper basket.

He opened the second message with a preoccupied air. He was thinking—thinking deeply. But in a moment all his preoccupation vanished as he glanced over its contents. He hungrily devoured the words written on the tinted paper.

"Am delighted at your promotion. I anticipated it. My most heartfelt good wishes. Do not let this success make you forget our meeting. Dare I hope that you may find your way to 17, Streamside Mansions, Kensington?—VITA VLADIMIR."

It was some moments before Ruxton's eyes left that message. A world of unsuspected emotion was stirring within him. He had not forgotten. He was never likely to forget. But in the midst of his emotion some freak of mind had caught and held the significance of this mysterious creature's congratulations. How—how had she learned of—his promotion, when no one but himself and the Prime Minister knew of it?

Suddenly he bestirred himself. He carefully refolded Vita's message, and placed it in his pocket. Then he turned to Heathcote.

"I shall have to go to Dorby to-night. My father wants me. It is rather important. Fortunately things here will not require me just now. But you must notify me of anything important happening. Meanwhile give orders to have my things got ready, and look me out a train. I must run out to send a wire."

"Can't I send it for you?"

"No-o. I think not, thanks."

CHAPTER IV

MR. CHARLES SMITH

A PROFOUND silence reigned in the library at Dorby Towers.

The pungent aroma of cigars weighed upon the atmosphere in spite of the wide proportions of the apartment. Considerable light was shed from the antique sconces upon the walls, as also by the silver candelabra upon the long refectory table which ran down the centre of the room. But withal it was powerless to dispel the dark suggestion of the old bookcases which lined the walls of the room.

Two men were occupying one side of the table, and Ruxton Farlow sat alone at the other. The eyes of all three were focussed intently upon the object lying upon the table, which was a ten-foot model of a strange-looking water craft.

The first to break the spell of the burden of silence was Sir Andrew Farlow, who, with a bearded stranger, occupied the side of the table opposite his son. But his was no attempt at speech. He merely leant forward with an elbow on the polished oak, and his fingers softly stroking his square chin and tightly compressed lips. He was humming softly, an expression of an intently occupied mind. The fixity of his gaze suggested a desire to bore a way to the heart of the secrets the strange model contained.

The bearded stranger was watching him closely while his eyes appeared to be focussed upon the object of interest, and presently, as though the psychological moment had arrived, he, too, leant forward, and, with an arm stretched out, terminating in a long, lean, tenacious-looking hand, he pressed a button on the side of the model. Instantly the whole interior of it was lit electrically, and the light shone through a series of exquisitely finished glass-covered port-holes extending down the vessel's entire sides.

He spoke no word, but sat back in his chair and went on smoking, while he closely watched for any sign of impression which the two interested spectators displayed.

The moments slipped by. The patient stranger sat on with his long lean legs crossed, and a benevolent smile in his large eyes. After a while Ruxton sat back in his chair. Then Sir Andrew abandoned his inspection, and turned to the man beside him.

It seemed to be the cue awaited, for the stranger promptly leant forward again and released a spring by the movement of a switch. Instantly the model split in half, and, opening much in the fashion of a pea-pod, displayed the longitudinal sections of its interior.

Simultaneously the two men whose lives had been hitherto given up to ship construction rose to their feet, and pored over the wonderful and delicate mechanism and design the interior revealed.

Then it was that Sir Andrew verbally broke the silence.

"Will you explain, Mr. Smith?"

The inventor removed his cigar.

"You know—marine mechanism?" he enquired.

Sir Andrew nodded.

"Yes, unless there is a new principle here."

"It is the perfected submarine principle which was used towards the end of the war. There is no fresh detail in that direction."

"We have a complete knowledge of that principle," said Ruxton. "We have been constructing for the Admiralty throughout the war."

"Good."

There was a distinct "T" at the end of the word as Mr. Smith spoke it.

Ruxton shot a quick glance in his direction. The man's whole personality was an unusual one. He was very tall, and very thin. His intellectual head, quite nobly formed, was crowned by a shock of snow-white hair closely hogged, as might be a horse's mane. His features were almost as lean as his body. But the conformation of a magnificent forehead and the gently luminous eyes, beneath eyebrows almost as bushy as a well-grown moustache, made one forget the fact. Then, too, the carefully groomed, closely cut snow-white beard and moustache helped to disguise it still more. It was the face of a man of great mentality and lofty emotions, a face of simplicity and kindliness. It was, in fact, a face which demanded a second scrutiny, and one which inspired trust and liking.

To the rest must be added certain details which seemed a trifle extraordinary in view of his profession. If his tailor did not trade in Bond Street then he certainly must have served his apprenticeship in those select purlieus. Perfect cut and excellence of material marked every detail of his costume, which was of the "morning" order.

"Then there is little enough to explain, except for the architectural side of the matter," Mr. Smith went on, with a peculiarly back-of-the-throat tone in his speech, which also possessed a shadow of foreign accent. "I am not offering you a submarine principle. That is established now all over the world. I please to call my invention a submersible merchantman. You will observe the holds for merchandise. You will see the engine-rooms," he went on, rising and pointing out each detail as he enumerated it. "There are the stateroom decks, with the accompaniment of saloon and kitchens, and baths, and—and all the necessities of passenger traffic. Everything is there on a lesser scale such as you will find on a surface liner. Its speed and engine power will compare favorably with any liner afloat up to ten thousand tons. Thus it has the speed of a surface craft on the surface, with the added advantages of a submarine. In addition to these I have a light, in the course of production, which will serve to render the submarine immune from the dangers of submersion. I call it the 'U-rays.'"

"The U-rays?" Ruxton's enquiry came like a shot.

"Just so."

Mr. Smith replied quite unhesitatingly, and Ruxton's obvious suspicion was disarmed.

"This vessel," the inventor went on, quite undisturbed, "solves the last problem of sea traffic under—all conditions."

The light of enthusiasm was shining in the man's luminous eyes as he made his final pronouncement. It was as though the thought had filled him with a profound hope of the fulfillment of some ardent desire. It suggested to the more imaginative Ruxton that he cared more for the purpose of his invention than for its commercial aspect to himself.

"You speak, of course, of—war," Ruxton said.

The large eyes of the stranger widened with horror and passion.

"I speak of—international murder!" he cried fiercely.

Sir Andrew turned from the model at the tone of the reply. Ruxton would have pursued the subject, but Mr. Smith gave him no opportunity.

"Your pardon, gentlemen," he said with a sudden, exquisite smile of childlike simplicity. "Memories are painful. I have much that I remember, and—but let us keep to the business in hand."

"Memories are painful to us all—here in England," said Ruxton gently. "But—this is a beautiful model. Perfect in every detail."

"It was made in my own shops," returned the inventor simply.

"And you say this," indicating the model, "has been tested on a constructed vessel?"

"I have travelled more than ten thousand miles in just such a vessel. I have travelled on the surface at twenty-four knots, and under the surface at fifteen. I have carried mixed cargoes, and I have carried certain passengers. All these things I have done for experiment, so that the principle should be perfected. You can judge for yourselves. A vessel of this type awaits your pleasure at any hour. A vessel of two thousand tons."

"Two thousand?" The incredulous ejaculation escaped Sir Andrew before he was aware of it.

"It is nothing," exclaimed Mr. Smith, turning quickly. "A vessel of ten thousand tons can just as easily be constructed."

The sweeping assertion spoken with so simple a confidence had the effect of silence upon his audience. It was overwhelming even to these men who had witnessed the extraordinary development of invention during the war.

After awhile Ruxton broke the silence.

"In your original communication to us you assured us of a means of avoiding the losses we endured during the war from submarine attack. This I understand is the—means. Will you point its uses? I see it in my own way, but I should like to hear another mind on the subject."

Mr. Smith folded his arms and settled himself in his chair. Ruxton was not seeking information on the subject of the boat. His imagination told him all he wanted to know in that direction. It was the man he wanted to study. It was the man he was not certain of. He was convinced that this man was a foreigner, for all his British name. He desired to fathom the purpose lying behind this stranger's actions.

"A great Admiral just before the war," said the inventor, "declared that the future of naval warfare lay under the water, and not on the surface, as we have always believed. He was right. But he did not go as far as he might have gone. The *whole future of shipping* lies as much under water as on the surface. I tell you, gentlemen, that this boat, here, will afford untold blessings to humanity. To an island country it affords—existence. Think. This country, Britain, is not self-supporting. Is it not so? It could not keep its people alive for more than months. It depends upon supplies from all ends of the earth. All roads upon the high seas lead to Britain. And every helpless surface vessel, carrying life to the island people at home, is a target for the long-distance submarine. If an enemy possesses a great fleet of submarines he does not need to declare a war area about these shores. Every high sea is a war area where he can ply his wanton trade. With the submarine as perfect as it is to-day, Britain, great as she is in naval armaments, can never face another war successfully. *That thought is in the mind of all men already.*" The man paused deliberately. Then with a curious foreign gesture of the hands he went on. "But there is already established an axiom. Submarine cannot fight submarine—under the surface." He shrugged. "It is so simple. How can an enemy attack my submersible? The moment a submarine appears, the submersible submerges and the enemy is helpless. An aerial warship will become a spectacle for the amused curiosity to the ocean traveller. In peace time storms will have small enough terror, and on the calm summer seas we shall speed along at ever-increasing mileage. I tell you, gentlemen, the days of wholly surface boats are gone. The days of clumsy blockades are over, just as are the starvation purposes of contraband of war. With the submersible how is it possible to prevent imports to a country which possesses a seaboard? That is the proposition I put to the world in support of my submersible."

Father and son sat silently listening to the easy, brief manner of the man's explanation. Nor was it till he spoke of the futility of a war submarine's efforts against his submersible did any note of passion and triumph find its way into the man's manner. At that point, however, a definite uplifting made itself apparent. His triumph was in the new depth vibrating in his musical voice. There was a light in his eyes such as is to be found in the triumphant gaze of the victor.

Ruxton beheld these things with greater understanding than his father. Moreover, he interpreted them with that sympathetic understanding of one who possesses great ideals of his own. Whoever this man might be, wherever he came from, one thing was beyond all question in his mind. Here was no mere huckster seeking to trade his wares for the sole purpose of gain. Gain might be his object, but somehow he felt that it was not wholly so, not even paramount in his consideration. It seemed to him that the man had spoken the truth when he had said that his efforts were directed in the service of humanity.

But for all his understanding he had no intention of accepting his own reading without proof from the only direction in which proof could come.

"And what is the commercial aspect of the matter—between us?" he enquired in his most businesslike tone.

Mr. Smith looked up in a startled way from the deep reverie into which his own words had plunged him.

"Commercial?" he echoed a little helplessly.

"Yes." Ruxton smiled. "The—price."

Mr. Smith nodded readily and smiled back. But his reply carried no conviction.

"Yes, yes," he said hurriedly. "I was thinking. Of course—yes. The price."

His infantile manner brought a smile to the shrewd face of Sir Andrew. Ruxton only waited.

"I—had forgotten," Mr. Smith went on. Then, with his curious tenacious hands clasped about one knee, a hopeless sort of distress slowly filled his eyes. "It—it is difficult," he stumbled. Then quite suddenly a world of relief seemed to come to him. "Would it not be better to leave terms until you have seen, and proved for yourselves, of what my constructed vessel is capable? You see, any price I could name now would sound—er—excessive."

The manner of this strange creature was so delightfully naive that even the keen Yorkshire features of Sir Andrew were reduced to a smile of enjoyment.

"That's the way I like to hear an inventor talk, Mr. Smith," he cried heartily. "Most of 'em want large sums in options on the bare model and registered patents. If your invention—the constructed vessel is capable of what you claim for it, it is worth—millions."

But the millionaire's encouragement seemed to have an adverse effect upon the inventor. Trouble crept again into his eyes, and he passed one thin hand across his splendid forehead.

"If it serves to save innocent lives in the future, sir, it has done all that I ask of it," he said at last. "Its value to me then could never be reckoned in millions. There would not be enough cyphers in the mind of man to express that value."

To Ruxton the riddle of this man was growing in obscurity. For all his understanding Mr. Smith's attitude demanded explanation which as yet he was unable to give it.

But something in the nature of solution to the riddle was nearer than he had supposed. It came in the man's words which were added in further reply to his father.

"I have no fear but my invention will do these things," he said with strong conviction. "But," he added almost sombrely, "I have other fears."

"Others?"

The commercial mind of Sir Andrew was sharply suspicious.

"Yes."

Again came that troubled movement of the hand across the forehead. The man hesitated in a painful, embarrassed way. Then, with a perfectly helpless gesture, he blurted out something of that which Ruxton had been waiting for.

"Yes, yes," he cried, his eyes full of a passionate light. "I have fears, other fears. Nor are they idle. Nor are they to be belittled. I came here in secret. No one but my two confidential men, who brought this model, know of my coming. No one knows my whereabouts at all, but you, and those two men whom I can trust—even with my life. Fears. My God, if you only knew. I tell you there are people in the world, if they knew of my visit to you, if they saw that model lying on your table, who would not rest until my life was forfeited, and the utility of my invention to this country was destroyed forever."

The man stood up. His great height was drawn up to its uttermost. He was breathing hard, but the light in his eyes was not of the fear of which he spoke. They were burning with a strained defiance of that threat he knew to be hanging over him.

The others rose from their chairs simultaneously. Both were startled. But Sir Andrew far more than his son. Startlingly as the revelation had come, to Ruxton it *was* revelation. And now it was he who took the initiative. He leant across the table.

"I think I understand something that has been puzzling me all the evening, Mr.—Smith," he said. "And now that I understand it I am satisfied. You have come to us to-day at great danger to yourself. You are risking everything in the world that we shall have the benefit of your invention. The last thought in your mind is the commercial aspect of this affair. Your real object in coming is your secret for the present. I might even hazard a guess at it. But it is your secret, and one we have no desire to probe. You desire a pledge from us. That is obvious. And for myself I give it freely. Your secret is safe with me—safe as the grave. I shall avail myself of your offer of a trip in your submersible, and, if you will permit me, I shall make my own time for it in the near future. Will you allow me that privilege?"

The inventor impulsively held out his hand, and his relief was obvious and intense. It was almost as if he had feared the result of his revelation.

"Your wishes are entirely mine," he said, as Ruxton wrung his hand. "It was this necessity for secrecy which has troubled me. I did not think you would accept it. And—I feared the shattering of all my hopes." He turned to Sir Andrew, who stood watching the scene wonderingly.

"And you, sir?" he asked, with extended hand. "Have I your word?"

"Absolutely, sir."

The bluff tone, and the grip of the Yorkshire hand, had its prompt effect.

"I need no more."

The man proceeded to close up his model.

"And for communicating with you?" demanded Ruxton.

Mr. Smith looked up.

"The same address. Veevee, London. It will always find me."

"Thank you."

Two hours later Ruxton and his father were alone in the library. The inventor had gone, and his precious model had been carefully removed by the two men who had conveyed it to Dorby Towers. For those two hours Sir Andrew and his son had thrashed threadbare the situation created by the stranger's coming. And, incredible as it seemed, in the minds of both men was a steady conviction that the work of that evening was to mark an epoch in the history of their country.

The possibilities were of a staggering nature. Neither could probe the future under this new aspect. If this new principle of ocean traffic were to—— But it was "if." If the man were honest. If the invention were right. If—if, and again—if. That was it. And so they had talked it out.

Now it was time to seek that rest which Ruxton sorely needed. His had been a strenuous day, and he knew he must return to town to-morrow. He rose and stretched himself.

"Well, Dad, it's bed for me," he said, in the midst of a yawn.

His father looked up from his final cigar, which was poised in his hand.

"Yes. You must be tired, boy. There's one thing, though, about that man, that's occurred to me," he added, his mind still dwelling on the subject of their long discussion. "Did you notice his speech? He didn't sound to me English, and yet there—was no real accent."

Ruxton laughed.

"I wondered if that had escaped you." Then his eyes grew serious. "No, he isn't an Englishman. He isn't even Dutch. That I am sure of. But his nationality—no, I cannot say."

"No. It's a difficult matter with these foreigners."

"Yes. But if I can't locate his nationality I am certain of a very important fact."

"And that is?"

"He belongs to—Germany."

CHAPTER V

THE LURE

THAT Ruxton Farlow was a creature of destiny rather than a man who wrought only through the force of his own self-guidance was extraordinarily apparent. The purpose of his life filled his whole being. It was all of him, a dim light in the mist and fog of the future, ever encouraging onwards, yet yielding to him no vision of the path by which it might be the more easily reached. It was his lot to flounder on, frequently stumbling and yawning as the conformation and obscurities of the road compelled, but every step, every stumble, every bruise and buffet, added to the sum of progress achieved and pointed the unyielding nature which inspired his set purpose of reaching that ray of light beyond.

The coming into his life of the woman who called herself Vita Vladimir was an incident in his progress of far greater significance that even he had dreamed. Whither it inclined his footsteps he knew not. All he knew was that, almost in a moment, she had become definitely linked up with his future through a bond, the meaning of which even he had no full understanding of. All he knew was that she had some great bearing upon the ultimate, and that it was his desire to follow blindly the track she had opened up before him.

Nor had he any delusion as to his desire. There was not the smallest doubt but that her attraction had influenced his decision. He had listened to her words with a brain inspired by the warmth of the manhood within him, which her extraordinary beauty had stirred as it had never been stirred before.

It was in answer to this feeling that he left Yorkshire at the earliest opportunity, and hastened back to town. He merely gave himself time to change and hold a brief consultation with his secretary. Then he set out in search of the rather obscure little flat in Kensington.

His mind was perfectly clear as to the object of this visit. Just as he perfectly understood that even without that object it would have been his desire to make it. He wished to give this woman an answer to her request. He wished to fathom the manner by which she had learned of his promotion. And, apart from these things, he desired ardently to see her again. The recollection of that moonlit figure was a sharp negative on the photographic plates of memory, and he was anxious to study the original in the full light of day. Her undoubted beauty, and the romance of their first meeting, had left behind them an irresistible attraction; nor had he any desire to resist it.

His position in the world as the only son and partner of the greatest among the ship-owners of Britain, his political career, and his position as under-secretary in the Foreign Office of the late Ministry, had brought him into contact with the social world of London. But, hitherto, women had had small enough place in his life. The hunting-field and the coverts, with golf and rowing, had entirely claimed his leisure, which would have been considered something very like wasted had it been spent in Society's drawing-rooms. He was a big, strong, outdoor man, and possessed a great deal of that curious diffidence which is more apt to attack men of his bulk than those of lesser stature.

All these things had served to make him difficult as a prize worth striving for in the matrimonial market, and, doubtless, he had been thus saved to the work which he believed lay before him. He had never been a man of marked celibate tendencies. It was simply the fact that the sex question had always been dominated by the simple, hard-working, outdoor life he lived. Those who knew him had always taken a delight in prophesying that one day some woman would get hold of him, he would get *it* badly, and it would be a thousand to one chance she would be the wrong woman, and he would make a complete mess of things.

Now as he sat, filling to overflowing a small drawing-room chair, in Vita Vladimir's flat in Kensington, listening to the musical tones of the wonderful Polish beauty facing him on a wholly inefficient window seat, with his dark eyes, shining and intent, fixed upon her mobile features, it looked as though at least one part of his friends' prophecy was within measurable distance of being fulfilled.

The woman was talking rapidly, and the light and shade of emotion passing over her expressive face were quite irresistible.

"Your coming was more than I dared to hope," she said. "And yet—I knew you would. I mean underneath my fears. You know I feel I ought to tell you so many things that I have purposely hidden, and yet I know it would be a mistake to do so until—I have shown you all that which I promised. It makes me feel mean.

It makes me feel almost as if I were not acting honestly. And yet I know I am. But I think I can tell you one thing which may astonish you. Our meeting on the cliffs was the result of nearly two months' preparation and consideration. It was even in the nature of a plot, in which I was to be the instrument of communication. Furthermore it took me nearly two weeks of waiting and watching before I could decide that the right moment had arrived. You see, so secretly had we to move that I dared not chance a thing. The risk for all concerned was so great. Mr. Farlow, will you believe me when I say that yours is not the only life at stake in this adventure? Even now I dare not give you the details. You must still take me on trust, as you were kind enough to do—that night."

Ruxton nodded soberly, though his eyes were feasting upon the woman's superlative beauty as she reclined against the window casing in an all unconscious pose of considerable grace.

"I think I understand better than you imagine since I have seen—Mr. Charles Smith and his invention."

The woman's deeply-fringed grey eyes were widely alert.

"You have—associated us?"

"Veevee, London."

The woman nodded. There was no attempt at denial.

"I see," she said, and the grey eyes became interestedly speculative.

Ruxton glanced about him. He was swiftly taking in the details of the plainly furnished, extremely modern little drawing-room. It was the preliminary to the next step in this strange adventure. He saw about him no single suggestion of the personality of the woman who claimed it as her home. It might have belonged to anybody, from a superior business woman, who used it as a nightly refuge from the cares and worries of a commercial life, to a foreign visitor to London, desiring a convenient headquarters. It was to his mind a typical "furnished flat" as designated in the house agent's catalogue.

His eyes came back to the woman herself, and a deep, restrained admiration grew in their depths.

All that he had believed of her in the deceptive moonlight was more than confirmed in the warm light of day. He had no thought for her costume. In his man's way he realized a perfect harmony between that and the wonderful face and head that adorned it. He was aware only of the deep sleepy grey eyes so exquisitely fringed. The smooth, delicately tinted cheeks, and the mouth so ripe and full of the suggestion of youth. Above all was that wonderful glory of red-gold hair massed on the head with all the art of the hair-dresser, which transformed it into a crown which any queen might well have envied.

"I want to say something that may sound rough, even brutal," Ruxton said abruptly after the prolonged pause. "But then there are times in life when the suaveness of diplomatic methods becomes wholly misplaced—even an insult to the person towards whom they are directed. You will permit me to assure you that what I have to say is the outcome of the interest you have roused in me by all you have confided." He paused again thoughtfully. He was endeavoring to shut out of his mind the picture of the woman's personality which made what he was about to say seem so harsh and unnecessary. He nerved himself for the effort and proceeded.

"Let me say at once, that against all my—what shall I say—better sense? That will do. Against all my better sense I accepted and believed your story to me on the cliffs. Had I acted as my sense prompted I should have thrust it aside and ignored it, regarding you merely as one of my country's enemies, seeking, for some inexplicable reason, to leave me at the mercy of your confederates.

"However, for once instinct served me well. I committed no such injustice. Then on my return home I discovered a link, as I thought, between you and another matter which has since proved to be of considerable importance. I refer to Veevee, London. That link you do not deny. The combination suggests more fully the importance and *truth* of what you told me."

"The combination of the two things was part of the —preparation."

Vita Vladimir smiled. Her smile was like a sunbeam of early morning, and Ruxton was compelled to respond.

"That is how I now supposed. You must forgive me for what else I have to say. The natural result of a mind left groping is the dominance of imagination. 'Fact' is the only thing which can pin imagination down. At the present moment I am lacking in facts. I have only been told, and so my imagination has been turned loose. The result has been one or two things which I am going to put to you, and you can answer them or not. But my future action will be undoubtedly governed by your attitude. First, then, this is not your actual home. Second, your name is not Vita Vladimir. Third, you were kind enough to send me congratulation on my promotion to Cabinet rank when only the Prime

Minister, and his most intimate colleagues, were aware of it. Even the ubiquitous press had failed to steal the information."

Ruxton's challenge came as it was intended to come, shortly, sharply, even with a suggestion of brutality in it. He had outraged his own feelings in doing so. He knew in his heart he had no doubt of this wonderful creature, but his mind, that simple, keen, straightforward organ, trained in the hypocritical world of diplomacy, dictated its will upon him. He had been asked to believe something very like a fairy-tale, and the lips which had formulated the request were the most perfect it had ever been his lot to behold. However, the dictates of his heart, the warm young manhood in him were still subservient to the trained mind. The day might come when rebellion would overthrow such sway, but, for the moment, it held.

The woman took no umbrage. There was a quickening of the rise and fall of her beautifully rounded bosom, but that was the only sign of emotion permitted to escape her.

"Your observation is—quick," she said, with a slightly heightened color. "And what if these things are—true? Are they so very significant?"

Ruxton shrugged. Something of the warmth had passed out of his eyes. But he displayed not the smallest impatience.

Then the woman smiled. Her smile grew into a deep musical laugh.

"I am foolish. I am not clever enough for the work entrusted to me," she cried, spreading out her hands in a deprecating manner. "Here am I striving to win your perfect confidence by methods which might well characterize the most absurdly cumbersome and blundering child. I am deputed to urge you to an enterprise that entails risks—untold; maybe I am striving to send you to your—death. And this work is vital to the world, and, more than all, to your country. We are both striving in the cause of humanity, partners bound by no other tie, and yet in my endeavor I am raising doubt in your mind. Doubt of me, doubt of my purpose, even doubt of my honor. That is so like a woman—isn't it?"

The smile which the self-denunciation raised upon the man's face no longer lacked warmth.

"The clever knave is rarely at a loss for explanation," he said drily. "The lack of explanation often carries conviction."

The woman's slumberous eyes only smiled the more deeply.

"I have explanations for all these things, and I would give them," she said promptly. "And those explanations might astonish you—a little. But at present I have only admission to make, which may have a disastrous effect upon my hopes. This is not my home. It is only a sort of—office. My name is not Vita Vladimir, except in part. And as for my wire to you, the moment the personnel of the new Cabinet was decided upon by Sir Meeston Harborough and his colleagues, the news was conveyed by the usual underground methods—abroad. That is all."

"And you are in touch with—abroad?"

"It is quite simple," the woman went on, with a shrug. "No political movement, no movement of any significance goes on here but it is known in foreign official circles even before the press get it here. Remember the war. My father, who is interested in this matter I am engaged upon, is in touch with those official circles, and so I received the news within a few hours of the time Sir Meeston knew it himself."

The interest of this woman was very great. Its influence was growing on the man even more quickly than he knew. Her ready admission, her obviously true explanation of how she received the news which inspired her message of congratulation, these things had immediate effect. To a lesser mind than that of this youthful statesman, these things might well have inspired added doubt, but to Ruxton they told him all he wanted to know with definite assurance. He was convinced of her absolute sincerity, as he was convinced of—other things.

The woman was waiting anxiously for the attitude which was to follow her explanations. Her anxiety did not display itself in her eyes, which were as calm as though matters of vital importance were beyond even her appreciation. Nevertheless, her blood was tingling with an apprehension which left the silence which had fallen almost insupportable.

But Ruxton was thinking swiftly. For the moment all thought of the woman herself had been brushed aside. He was gazing at that dim misty light ahead, which was his goal, and he seemed to see the shadowy obstacles looming up which perhaps meant a life and death struggle in their surmounting. There was no pathway to the right or left. He must go on. It was the only road, a dangerous, deadly road, and it was the road this woman had offered him. He had probed deeply, far deeper than had seemed possible at first, and his probing had helped him to his decision.

He rose from his seat and stood towering and large in that small room. The sleepy eyes of the woman were raised expectantly to his face, and, deep down in their depths, a light of admiration, which had only his manhood for its object, was growing with each passing moment. She too rose from her seat at the window, and they stood facing each other perfect in their splendid youth.

"Well?"

The woman could no longer restrain her impatience. Her interrogation broke from her almost unconsciously.

"I came here to—accept your invitation to visit that—to see those things first hand, which is the duty of our country's political leaders," he said, with a smile which thrilled the expectant woman.

"And you will—accept?"

Ruxton nodded. His fine head, with its fair hair, was inclined in acquiescence.

"Thank God!"

The woman's exclamation was one of unrestrained thankfulness and relief. Had Ruxton needed any added proof of her honesty and sincerity, it was in that wonderful expression of fervid thankfulness which accompanied her words. But he had needed none, and it was the result of a coalition of heart and brain.

"I shall communicate with your father and appoint a time when I can start with him—on his submersible."

The woman's eyes were wide.

"My father!" she exclaimed.

"Surely—Mr. Charles Smith."

The laugh which followed Ruxton's announcement was full of delighted admiration.

"And we took so much trouble. We planned so carefully. We came to you because we believed you to be the only man approachable on such a subject. We did not realize we were approaching an intellect capable of fathoming and turning inside out our closely kept secrets."

"Intellect?" Ruxton laughed as he held out his hand in "good-bye." "It is not necessarily intellect which recognizes strong family likenesses. But I regret to say that your father, brilliant as he may be as an inventor, does not do you justice in the matter of his personal appearance. However, I shall send him a message addressed Veevee, London, which you will doubtless see, and I pray that Providence may bless our feeble efforts. From all I can imagine the immediate future will contain many uncertainties for me, so I do not know if we shall ever meet again. But I want to tell you that I thank you from the bottom of my heart for coming to me. If things are as bad as you think, then you have done our country an inestimable service—you and your father."

But his words had a different effect from that which might have been expected. A shudder of pain seemed suddenly to affect the woman and a great distress shadowed her beautiful eyes.

"Please don't," she cried. "If you knew all that is in here," she went on, pressing her hands upon her bosom, "you would understand all this thing means. Mr. Farlow, you have never felt terror as a woman can feel it. How could you? You, a man, so big, and strong, and fearless. Even your imagination, riot as it may, could never know the haunt which the sinking of the *Lusitania* has created in my woman's mind. Those poor helpless souls. Think of them, and think of some future, distant day when —— Oh, God! No, no! The service you speak of is no service. It is—Duty."

Ruxton was deeply affected by the evident sincerity of her distress. He had nothing to add. But Vita Vladimir brushed her moment of weakness aside, and gazed up at him with luminous, searching eyes.

"I had almost forgotten," she cried. "I am afraid I am but a poor plotter. The delight that you have accepted has put so much out of my poor brain." Then her eyes grew wide with awe and dread. "I told you that other lives than yours hang upon this matter. So—it is necessary for inviolable secrecy. Need you tell even your—father of your going? Need any one know? Your servants? Any one at all? It is a big thing to ask, but—life is very dear to us all, and —— No, no, what am I talking about? I must not beg. I must demand. For as sure as the sun rises to-morrow you will be silenced forever if word of this leaks out. We shall all be."

The woman's manner was far more impressive than her words. But Ruxton treated the matter almost lightly.

"Don't worry. I have given my promise to go. I am wilfully thrusting my neck into the noose waiting for it. I shall not take unnecessary chances. No one, not even my father, shall hear of this thing from me. So—good-bye until I return from—Germany."

Vita's relief found expression in a grave sort of smile.

"Thank you," she said quietly. "But—but you are not going to—Germany."

CHAPTER VI

THE OLD MILL COVE

HE had known the mill all his life ; at least he believed he had. He had gazed upon that awesome black ruin, keeping watch and ward over the wicked little cove below it, like some sentinel on guard over a dangerous criminal, with wide, childish eyes, and a mind full of terrified speculation. He had known it later, when, with boyish bravado, he had flouted the horrific stories of a superstitious countryside, and explored its barren, ruined recesses. He had known it still later, when, with manhood's eyes opening to a dim appreciation of all those things which have gone before in the great effort of life, he had seen in it a picturesque example of the endless struggle which has gone on since the dawn of life.

So he thought he knew it all.

Now the limitations of his knowledge were forcing themselves upon him. Now he was realizing that there were secrets by the score in those every-day things which a lifetime of contact may never reveal. The strangeness of it all set him marvelling. The limitations of human understanding seemed extraordinarily narrow.

He gazed down into the gaping cavity beneath his feet, and, by the dim rays of a lighted lantern, counted the worn stone steps until the darkness below swallowed up their outline.

Ruxton Farlow straightened himself up and glanced about him at the bare stone walls, from the joints of which the cement had long since fallen. He looked up at the worm-eaten, oaken rafters which had stood the wear of centuries. The flooring which they supported had long since fallen into decay, and he only wondered how much longer those sturdy oaken beams would continue to support the colossal weight of the millstones now resting from their grinding labors.

Through the rents which time and weather had wrought he saw the warm glow of daylight above, for all was ruin in the great old mill, ruin within and without. As it was with the walls of stone, and the great tower of woodwork above them, so it was with the outbuildings beyond the doorway, within which he stood. The walls remained, heavily buttressed by the hardy hands of a race of men who had understood so well the necessity for fortifying their homes against all eventualities, but the timbers of the roofs had long since fallen victims to the inclemencies of the seasons and the ruthless "North-easters" which, probably, since the time when the iron shores of Britain first emerged from beneath the waters, had beaten their relentless wings against the barrier which held up their freedom.

Ruxton set his lantern on the ground and moved away to the wide doorway, which no longer possessed the remotest sign of the old wooden doors which had probably been at one time heavy enough to resist a siege. Here he drew a letter from his pocket and read it carefully over by the light of the sunset.

"DEAR MR. FARLOW:

"I never knew your wonderful coast could be so interesting, even absorbing. I feel I owe you personal thanks for a delightful time, simply because you live—where you live. I have discovered a most wonderful spot. I say discovered, but probably you have known it from the days when you were first able to toddle about by yourself. However, I must tell you of it. It is an old, old, ruined mill, regarded by the folks on your coast as an evil place which is haunted by the spirits of the smugglers who once upon a time used it as the headquarters for their nefarious trade. But the incredible part of it is we unearthed a secret in it which has remained hidden for generations, possibly centuries. Now listen carefully and I will tell you of this secret. In the middle of the stone chamber under the mill there is the entrance to a passage which communicates with that villainous cove over which the evil eye of the old mill forever gazes. Six inches beneath the surface of the debris on the floor there is a slate slab, and, on raising this, you will discover a stone staircase which goes down, down,—follow it, and you shall see what you shall see. I have since discovered that this is the *only means of reaching the beach of the cove—unless you possess wings.* But I began this note with the intention of only telling you how much I am looking forward to seeing you again on Thursday evening at eight o'clock. I do hope you are taking full advantage of your vacation from parliamentary work, and are storing up plenty of good health upon your wonderful, wonderful moors.

"Yours very sincerely,
"VITA VLADIMIR."

Ruxton refolded the letter and put it away. He understood it was the final summons to that great adventure which was to tell him of the threat overshadowing his beloved country.

He had obeyed it readily, eagerly, and now that the reality of the whole thing was developing he paused to consider the motives urging him.

He was going to witness things first hand. He was glad. His understanding of duty assured him that it was the only means by which he could hope to convince others, when the time came. But was this his sole motive? Was this the motive which had inspired that feeling of exaltation when he first read the perfumed note, so carefully written lest it should fall into wrong hands? He knew it was not.

His eyes were raised to the glistening sea away beyond the cove. He was gazing straight out through the narrow opening of the cove where the precipitous cliffs rose sheer out of the blue waters and marked the entrance which the country-folk sensationally loved to call "Hell's Gate." His mind was searching and probing the feelings which inspired him, and he knew that the beckoning hand of the woman was exercising a greater power than any sense of duty. He did not blind himself. He had no desire to. Those dark Slavonic eyes of his were wide and bright, and the half smile of them was full of an eager warmth. The idealist mind behind them was widely open to its own imagery. He saw through those Hell's Gates the perfect, palpitating figure which had poured out its burden of soul to him on the edge of those very cliffs; and she was—beckoning.

The youth of him had been engulfed in the soul of the woman. Nor, as yet, did he realize the extent of the power she was exercising. All he knew was that he had neither the power nor desire to resist the summons, and herein lay the distinguishing mark of those whom Destiny claims.

After a few moments he glanced at his watch. And at once the alertness of the man was displayed. It was twenty minutes to eight, and shortly after eight it would be low tide. The appointment had been made with regard to that, and that while he approached from the land, she would come by water. Therefore he must not delay.

Dismissing every other consideration he turned back to the mysterious stairway he had unearthed and began its descent, aided by the light of the lantern he had discovered secreted upon the top step, ready for his use.

His progress was rapid and easy. The vaulted, declining passage beneath the mill was high and wide, and constructed of masonry calculated to withstand the erosion of ages. It was moist and slimy, and the steps were at times slippery, but these things were no deterrents.

The stairway, however, seemed endless in the dim lantern light, and by the time he had completed the journey he had counted upwards of one hundred steps. At the bottom he paused and looked back up the way he had come, but, in the blackness of the tunnel, his light revealed little more than the first few steps.

Without further pause he turned to ascertain the nature of the place upon which the stairway had debouched. It was a wide and lofty cavern of Nature's fashioning, except that the walls and the natural obstructions of the flooring had been rendered smooth and clear by the hand of man. It was easy to estimate the purposes of this subterranean abode. There was less imagination in the legends of the old mill than he had supposed. If the books of his childish reading had any foundation in their local color this was certainly the den of some old-time smugglers.

He passed rapidly along the declining passage, and the end of it came as he expected to find it. It was a cave which opened in the face of the cliff overlooking the cove, but so ingeniously hidden by Nature that its presence could never have been even guessed at by any chance visit from the sea.

He stood at the opening and gazed out upon the already twilit cove. But he could not see the sea from where he stood ; only along the face of the cliff to his right, down which, zigzagging and winding, a sort of rough-hewn stairway communicated with the beach below. In front of him a great projection of rock, as though riven from the main cliff at some far-off time by the colossal forces of Nature, hid the entire entrance of the cavern. And so narrow was the space intervening that he could touch it with an outstretching of his arm. It was a remarkable hiding-place. Nor did he marvel that he had never heard of it before. But the rapidly deepening twilight of the cove warned him of the approach of the hour of his appointment. So he blew out his lantern and began the descent to the beach nearly fifty feet below.

Within five minutes he was standing in the centre of a patch of golden sand with the still ebbing water of the cove lapping gently at his feet.

A curious change had come over him. All interest inspired by the journey through the cavern was entirely gone. Even, for the time, he had no longer any thought of the purpose for which he was there. His mind was absorbed in the curious weird of the place, and the dreadful feeling of overwhelming might bearing in and down upon him.

The appalling grey barrenness, the height of the frowning ramparts which surrounded him on all sides, except the narrow opening to the sea. The absolute inaccessibility of those frowning walls, and the melancholy scream of the thousands of gulls which haunted the place. It was tremendous. It was terrible. But added to all these things was a discovery which he made almost upon the instant. With the instinct of personal security his eyes sought the high-water mark upon the beach. There was none. It was high up on the cliff sides at no point less that ten feet above the highest point of the beach. Herein lay the terror of the cove which lived in the minds of the dwellers upon the moors. Here was its real terror. A rising tide, and the secret of the smuggler's cavern undiscovered, and—death! He smiled as he thought of the name given to the entrance to the cove. Hell's Gate! It was surely ——

"Ahoy!"

The cry echoed about the grey walls in haunting fashion. Ruxton was startled out of his reverie. In a moment his repulsion at what he beheld was forgotten. He remembered only his purpose, and his searching eyes gazed out over the water.

"Ahoy!" he replied, when the last echo of the summons had died out.

He could see no boat. He could discover no human being. And—it was a man's voice that had hailed him.

For some moments a profound silence prevailed. Even the gulls ceased their mournful cries at the intrusion of a human voice upon their solitude.

Ruxton searched in every direction. Was this another surprise of this extraordinarily mysterious place? Was this ——? Quite suddenly his gaze became riveted upon a spit of low, weed-covered rock, stretching out into the calm water like a breakwater. There was a sound of clambering feet, and as his acute hearing caught it, a sort of instinct thrust his hand into his coat pocket where an automatic pistol lay. Then he laughed at himself and withdrew his hand sharply. The figure of a man scrambled up on to the breakwater.

They stood eyeing each other for several thoughtful moments. Then without attempting to draw nearer the stranger called to him.

"Mr. Farlow, sir. This way, if you please."

Without hesitation Ruxton crossed over to him and scrambled on to the rocks.

"You are from ——?" he demanded.

The question was put sharply, but without suspicion.

"The lady's waiting for you out there," replied the man simply. "We haven't much time, sir. You can't come in here on a rising tide, and you can't get out of it either. It's hell's own place for small craft, or any craft for that matter on a rising tide." He threw an anxious glance at the water.

Ruxton was gazing down at the little boat lying the other side of the natural breakwater. It was a petrol launch of some kind, but small and light as a cockleshell. There was another man in the stern, and he observed that both he and the man beside him were in some sort of uniform.

"I didn't see you come in," he went on curiously.

"We've been lying here half an hour, sir. Our orders were to wait till just before the tide turned. We've got about half an hour, sir," the man added significantly.

"Where's the vessel?" enquired Ruxton.

"Just outside, sir."

"I didn't see her."

"She's lying submerged."

"And Miss Vladimir is—aboard?"

"The lady is, sir," replied the man, with a shadow of a smile in his deep-set blue eyes.

The stranger stood aside, a direct invitation to Ruxton to climb down into the boat. But the latter made no move to do so.

Then the man pushed his peaked cap back from his forehead and displayed a shock of sandy grey hair which matched his closely trimmed whiskers.

"You'll excuse me, sir," he said, a trifle urgently, "but we've got to get out smart. Once the tide turns it races in here like an avalanche. We'll never make Hell's Gates if we aren't smart, and we don't want to get caught up in Hell itself."

The man's urgency had the desired effect. Ruxton stooped down and lowered himself into the bow of the boat.

"That's right, sir, it'll trim the boat," the man approved, as he dropped lightly in amidships. In a moment the clutch was let in and the little craft backed out of its narrow harbor.

It was a moment of crisis. Ruxton Farlow had practically committed himself to the power of these strangers. Not quite though. For he had taken the bow seat, and his loaded automatic was in his pocket still. However, the position was not without considerable risk. He had expected to meet Vita. Instead he had been met by two men in uniform. They were both in middle life, and burly specimens of the seafaring profession.

He had calculated the chances carefully before taking his final decision. Moreover he had closely appraised the men in charge of the boat. They were British. Of that he was certain. Nor were they men without education. On the whole he did not see that the balance lay very much in their favor if any treachery were contemplated.

"You are British," he said to the man in front of him, as the boat swung round head on to the gates of the cove and began to gather speed.

"Yes, sir. Served my time in the Navy—and had a billet elsewhere ever since."

"Since the war?"

"No, sir. Before the war."

"Where?"

The man faced round with a smile, while his comrade drove the little boat at a headlong pace through the racing waters.

"Where a good many of our Navy's cast-offs go, sir. In Germany."

CHAPTER VII

ON THE GREY NORTH SEA

BRIEF as was the interval between leaving the treacherous cove and the moment when Ruxton Farlow found himself surrounded by the tasteful luxury of the saloon of the long, low, strange-looking craft waiting just outside to receive him, it was not without many thrilling experiences.

To a man of less imagination the very few minutes in the petrol launch would have meant little more than a rather exciting experience. But for Ruxton they possessed a far deeper significance. Nor was the least the feeling that he had slammed-to the doors of the life behind him, bolted and barred and locked them, and—flung away the key.

That was the man. Sensitive to every mood that assailed him, yet urged on by an indomitable purpose, he had no more power to raise a hand to stay the tide of life upon which he was floating than he had to check the racing current which bore him beyond the threatening shoals of the Old Mill Cove.

What a mill-race the latter was! The man in charge of the launch had by no means exaggerated it. The little craft, urged by its powerful motor, surged through the water till the sea washed over its prow, and Ruxton was forced to shelter beneath the decked-in peak, whence he could observe the man amidships, who never once desisted from his efforts on the well pump.

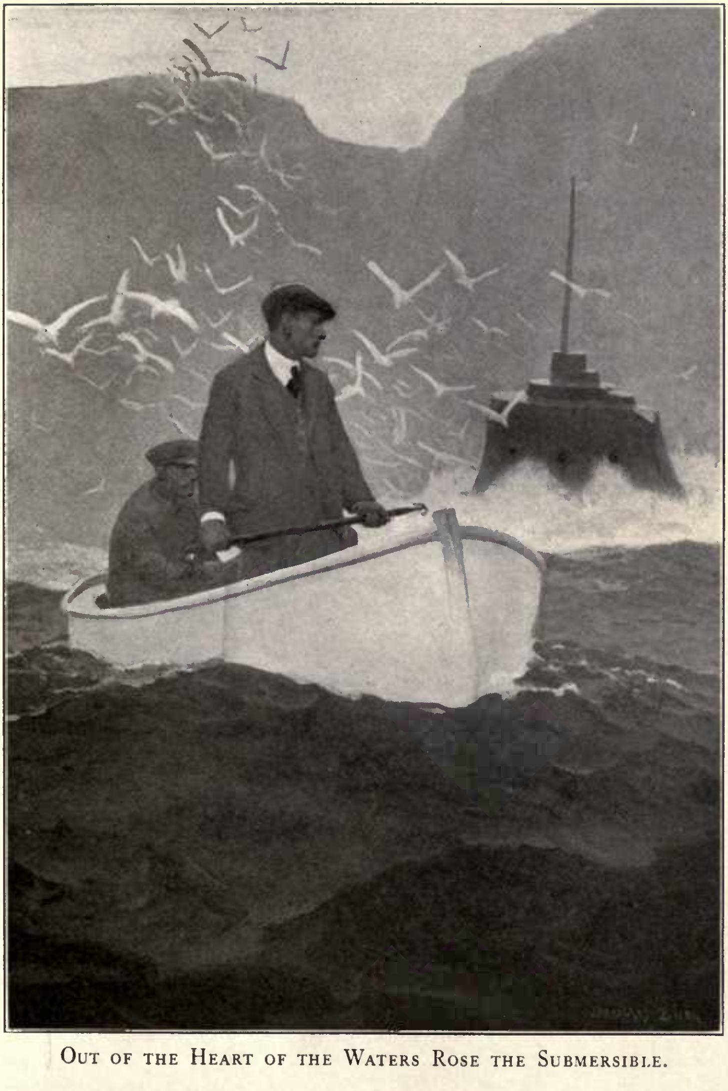
Then, just beyond the jaws of the cove, they entered a stretch of tumultuous popple where the ebb met the opposing currents along the coast. Here the boat was tossed about like the proverbial feather, and to navigate it into the smooth water beyond demanded all the consummate seamanship of those responsible for its safety.

Then, out of the heart of the grey waters, came the abrupt rising of the submersible. There was a tremendous swirling and upheaval less than fifty yards away, and the grey-green monster of the deep reared its forlorn-looking deck, with its conning-tower, its sealed hatchways, and its desolate deck rails, above the surface, and lay there, long and low and as evil-looking as only a mind filled with memories of the late war could have pictured it.

Two minutes later Ruxton had left the little launch, had stepped aboard the submersible and passed down the "companion" to the saloon beneath the flush deck, once more to be greeted by the woman who seemed to have become so much a part of the new life opening out before him.

Her greeting was cordial.

"I knew you would come," she said, as she left her hand for a moment in his. Then her grey eyes, so full of warmth, shadowed for a moment. "And now that you have come I—could almost wish that I had had nothing to do with it. You see, I haven't the courage of my convictions. I know they are right, but—I am afraid."



Out of the Heart of the Waters Rose the Submersible.

When he answered her the influence of the woman was greater than Ruxton knew.

"You need not be," he said simply. "We are not fighting for ourselves, so—why fear?"

The woman had no verbal reply. She regarded for one moment the strong face of the man, and the meaning of that regard was known only to herself. Had Ruxton possessed more vanity it is possible he might have read it aright, but vanity with him was so small a quantity as to be almost negligible.

Again the woman held out her hand.

"The tide will not wait. I must hurry ashore." Then she smiled. "I must go, too, while the courage your words have momentarily inspired remains. My father will join you immediately. Good-bye and good ——"

"You do not travel with us?"

Ruxton's enquiry was frankly disappointed. The other shook her beautiful head.

"No woman may venture where you are going. No woman has ever set foot there. I know it all, as you will understand later, but—no, I return with the launch. The tide will just serve us. Good-bye and good luck."

Ruxton was left listening to the sound of her footsteps mounting the companionway. Then, as he heard the door of the conning-tower above close with a slam, he turned about and sought one of the luxurious sofas with which the saloon was furnished.

As he sat he swayed gently to the motion of the vessel, and for the first time became aware of the automatic change to artificial light in the room. He knew at once that the vessel was returning once more to those depths whence he had witnessed it emerge. He gazed about him speculatively. The lights were carefully placed and diffused to prevent the trying nature of a constant artificial glare.

He became aware of the splendid appointments of the saloon, which was a fine example of the marine architect's handicraft. The apartment itself was some twenty feet wide, and he judged it to occupy most of the vessel's beam. It was probably a similar length. The carpet on which his feet rested was a rich Turkey. Nor were the rest of the furnishings essentially of the character of a ship's cabin. True, there was a centre dining-table bolted to the deck, and the accompanying swinging chairs, but there was a full grand piano of German make. There were several comfortably upholstered lounges. There was exquisite plastic panelling of warm, harmonious tints on the upper parts of the walls and the ceilings, while the lower walls were clad in polished carved mahogany. He sought for the source of the daylight which had filled the room when he first entered, and discovered a great skylight overhead which was now covered by a metal shield on the outside, which, he concluded, must close over it automatically with the process of submerging.

But his further observations were cut short by the abrupt opening of a door in the mahogany panelling and the entrance of—Mr. Charles Smith. He came swiftly across the room, his steps giving out no sound upon the soft carpet.

"Mr. Farlow," he cried, holding out one tenacious hand in greeting, "you have done me a great honor, sir. You have done me an inestimable service in coming. I can—only thank you."

But Ruxton was less attentive to his words than to the man. There was a change in him. A subtle change. He was no longer the enthusiastic inventor, almost slavishly striving to enlist sympathy for his invention. There was something about him which suggested command—even an atmosphere of the autocrat. Perhaps it was that here he was in his own natural element—the element which he had himself created. Perhaps ——

But he left it at that. It was useless to speculate further. He still experienced the sense of trust and liking which had been inspired at their first meeting by the noble forehead and the gentle, luminous eyes, so like, yet so unlike, those other eyes which so largely filled his thoughts.

He willingly responded to the extended hand. And the man seemed to expect no reply, for he went on at once —

"I was in my laboratory when you came aboard. Now I am entirely at your service."

"Good." Ruxton nodded. "I feel there must be a lot of talk between us—without delay."

The inventor looked at his watch. Then he pointed at the lounge from which Ruxton had risen, and seated himself in one of the swivel chairs at the dining-table.

"We have nearly two hours before supper is served. May I send for some refreshment for you?"

Ruxton dropped into the seat behind him.

"Thanks, no," he declined, "I dined early—purposely. All I am anxious for now is—explanation."

The manner in which his eyelids cut flatly across the upper part of the pupils of his dark eyes gave his gaze a keenly penetrating quality. He wanted explanation, full and exhaustive explanation. Warnings, and mere intangible suggestions, no longer carried weight. He must know the whole thing which the future had to reveal to him.

The white-haired man seemed lost in thought. Again Ruxton noted a change. The lean face and gentle eyes yielded to something very like an expression of dejection. It was almost as if the man shrank from the explanations demanded of him, while yet he knew they must be made.

At length he raised his eyes and regarded his guest with an almost pathetic smile.

"Explain? Ah, yes. I must explain everything now." He sighed. "Where—where shall I begin?" He crossed his long legs and strove to settle himself more comfortably in his chair, while Ruxton waited without a sign.

"It is hard to explain—all," he said, after a brief pause. "But I know it must be. Mr. Farlow, can you imagine what it means when a man who has always regarded his honor and his country's honor before all things in the world suddenly finds himself called upon to confess that his country's honor has been outraged by his country, and his own honor has been outraged by himself? If you can, then perhaps you will understand my position when explanation is demanded of me."

Ruxton averted the steady regard of his eyes. He did not desire to witness this man's pain.

"I think I know," he said. Then quite abruptly he changed from the English language to German, which he spoke with the perfect accent of a man educated in Frankfurt. "But it may save you much if you begin by telling me your real name. The name you are known by in—Germany."

A pair of simple, startled eyes gazed back into his.

"Has—Vita—told you?" he demanded.

Ruxton shook his head.

"Then how did you know?"

"Does it matter? I desire to make it easier for you."

For a few moments neither spoke. The artificial light in the room had merged once more into daylight. There was again the sound of the opening and shutting of iron doors on deck above them. There were also the harsh tones of orders being given.

Ruxton knew that it was the return of the launch which had conveyed this man's daughter ashore, and that it was being taken on board and stowed within the parent craft. Presently the sounds died away. Once more the light in the saloon became artificial, and the silent throb of engines made themselves felt. The journey had begun.

"Well?"

Ruxton had now given himself entirely to the use of the German language.

The inventor cleared his throat.

"My name is Stanislaus. Stanislaus, Prince von Hertzwohl."

Ruxton Farlow did not move a muscle. There was not the quiver of an eyelid, nor one detail of change of expression. Yet he was not unmoved at the mention of the man's real name. Although he had half expected it, it came with something very like a shock.

Stanislaus von Hertzwohl! Did he not know it? Did not the whole wide world know it? Was it not the one name, out of all the great German names associated with the war, which was anathematized more surely even than that of the Kaiser himself?

Stanislaus von Hertzwohl! The man who had perfected the German submarine. The man who had made possible the hideous slaughter of innocent victims upon the high seas. The man at whose door was laid the responsibility for that inhuman massacre—the sinking of the *Lusitania.* The man whom the world believed was the father of every diabolical engine of slaughter devised to combat his country's enemies.

"Of course, I know the name," he said simply. "Everybody knows it."

His reply seemed to fire the powder train of the Prince's passionate emotion.

"Ach!" he cried, with a desperately helpless gesture of expressive hands. "That is it. Everybody! Everybody knows it! They know the name, but they do not know the truth."

Then, in a moment, the fire of his emotion seemed to die out.

"Mr. Farlow, I want you to know that truth," he went on calmly. "Will you listen to it now? Will you listen to it with an open mind, or—or have you already sat in judgment, and, with the rest of an unthinking, unreasoning world, condemned me?"

Ruxton's thoughts were pacing rapidly with his feelings. They had travelled swiftly back to that moonlit night upon the Yorkshire cliffs. To him had come the woman again, so fair, so radiant in her perfect womanhood, so passionate in her horror of the tragedy of the world war. These things had been beyond all doubt in their sincerity and truth. She was this man's daughter. She was loyally supporting her father now. Then his mind passed on to the scene in the library at Dorby

Towers. It had been his work for years to deal with people whose superficial presentment was only calculated to cloak real purpose. He had read these two people out of his experience.

"Judgment is only for those who possess all the facts," he observed quietly. "Will you continue?"

The decision of his attitude seemed to inspire the white-haired man so patiently awaiting his reply. He crossed his legs, and, drawing up one well-shod foot, nursed its ankle in his clasped hands. He was leaning forward full of an anxious, nervous expression of attitude. It almost seemed as if his guest's judgment were to him a last straw of hope. The noble forehead was a-dew with moisture. His bushy eyebrows were sharply drawn in a great effort of concentration. His eyes, so widely simple, usually so expressive of childhood's innocence, were now full of a suffering that was almost overwhelming.

"If I had been guilty of a fraction of that of which the world accuses me could I have dared, or cared, to approach you with my latest invention, and—the other proposals? Keep that question in your mind while I talk. It is so easy to condemn, and, having condemned, reversal of judgment is well-nigh impossible. If I am guilty it is only of a patriot's devotion to the country to which *I believed* I owed allegiance. That, and an even greater devotion to the problems of making possible those things which seemed impossible. In not one of the problems of invention have I ever possessed a motive other than that which has inspired every engineer engaged upon naval armaments in every other country. Never in my life have I devised any weapon for the army other than the monster siege mortar. The liquid fire, the gases, the dozen and one contrivances for slaughter have found their inception in other brains than mine. I state these facts simply. You must trust them, or dismiss them, as you will. I am a marine inventor solely, except for that one weapon which was legitimate enough—the siege mortar. You, who understand the nature of marine invention, must assuredly realize that one man's brain, one man's lifetime are all too brief and limited to permit a division of his powers with any hope of success."

He paused as though offering opportunity for comment, but none was forthcoming. So he went on, his body slightly swaying to and fro, his eyes assuming a passionate fire that gave to his whole aspect an atmosphere of vigorous protest.

"I am a Pole," he went on presently. "I am a Pole, born in German Poland. My parents were poor, but we claim direct descent from the ancient royal house. Now let me make my own thoughts and feelings clear to you. I was brought up under German methods, German education. I was taught, as every child within the German Empire is taught, to believe that Germany is above and before all the nations of the world, and that, in the brief life of this earth, nothing else but German national interests matter to its people. Now mark the obvious result of such a training. I make no apology. I, beginning life in my father's little engineering shop, finding myself with an abnormal capacity for invention, seeking to make for myself and family a competence—what do I do? I place whatever ability I may possess at the service of Germany. I devote myself to discovery in the one direction in which official Germany has looked since the war of 1870.

"The next step comes quickly. It came so quickly that it well-nigh overbalanced my whole sense of proportion. The problem that appealed to me was the enormous strength of fortresses being built by our neighbors against our borders. We were doing the same against theirs. It was almost a simple problem. I said that if our fortresses were stronger than theirs, and we possessed a secret weapon which could destroy theirs, then our empire was safe from invasion for all time. So it came about that I took plans of my great siege mortars to the authorities. They were considered, and the guns were ultimately made. On experiment they proved an instantaneous success, and I was at once given rank and wealth, and ordered to work on the development of the gun-power of the Navy. It was this that converted me to marine engineering. From then onwards my career became one series of triumphs—from Germany's point of view. Till now, as you know, I have been rewarded with the revival of an old Polish title, to which by birth I am entitled, and am placed—as perhaps you do not know—in supreme command of Germany's naval construction."

There was no atmosphere of triumph in the man's manner. There was no victorious inspiration in the tones of his voice. With each word which announced the progress of his triumph an almost painful dejection seemed to settle more and more heavily upon him.

Still Ruxton refrained from comment. He knew that the vital things had yet to be told. Nor had he any desire to break up the man's train of thought. There still remained the tragedy of triumph which this man's life concealed.

The man's voice came again in level tones which had lost all light and shade. He spoke like one utterly weary in mind, heart, and body.

"If I had only known," he said, with a dreary shake of his snow-white head. "But," he added with a shrug, "I did not know. I was blinded by success, and a passionate devotion to my work." He drew a deep breath. "But I knew later. Oh, yes. I knew. The greatest triumph and the greatest disaster of my life was when I converted the paltry little coast defence submarines into the ocean-going pirates they afterwards became. But it was not until Germany declared a submarine blockade of these shores that I knew what I had done. Up to that time I had been a—German patriot. From that moment I became a simple, heart-broken human being. My legitimate engines of war had been turned against the innocent lives of a defenceless people, and when the massacre of fifteen hundred souls took place with the sinking of the *Lusitania* I think for the time I became demented."

He was breathing hard. His face had become almost stony in its expression. It was the face of a man who for the time is beyond all further feeling. Quite abruptly, however, he released his hold upon his foot, and ran his long fingers through his shock of white hair.

"Ach! How willingly would I have undone all I had done. I tried to resign on various pleas. Health!" He laughed, a hollow, mocking laugh. "As well try to struggle free from the strangling rope of the hangman with hands tied. To my horror I found that I belonged body and soul to Germany, and my rank and wealth was the price the country had paid for my brains. Oh, yes, I was no honored patriot serving my country. I was its bond slave, the slave of Prussian militarism. And to the end of my days that slave I must remain.

"Need I tell you of all the suffering I have since endured? No, I think not. No repentant murderer could have suffered more for his crimes than I have done. I have striven, by every possible argument, to assure myself that mine was not the blame, but no conviction has resulted. The world cannot blame more cruelly than I do myself, and yet—I am innocent of all intent.

"Throughout all the struggle I have had with my own soul no glimmer of light reached me until my daughter came to my rescue. And I think it was her woman's wit, supported by her own brave heart, which has saved me. She, in her great pity and love of humanity, started a fresh thought in the poor brain with which Providence endowed me. It surely was only a woman's mind could have conceived so simple a solution to my trouble. It was all done in one brief sentence. She said, 'The brain that can invent to destroy can invent to save.' And from that moment hope came to me."

He leant forward urgently. The veins at his temples stood out with the mental effort of the moment.

"Need I detail the result. I came to you as the only possible person to help on the work. You were selected after careful thought. I have warned you of the threat hanging over your country. Now I will show you the engines of destruction which I have been forced to perfect to complete the execution of that threat. But I have already shown you my submersible. You are now on board the constructed vessel, the development and adoption of which is the only antidote to the devilish plans of the country to which I belong, plans which are staggering in their possibilities. They are so simple, yet so vast and terrible when made against England. Listen: Germany has abandoned all other naval construction in favor of my new boat—the Submersible Dreadnought. Do you realize the type? It is a heavily armored vessel with the gun-power of the surface dreadnought, and its speed, but with all the attributes of the submarine. A fleet of nominally three hundred is being constructed. It will be larger by far. In a few years it will be possible to ring your country round with these lurking machines, each of which will be capable of engaging successfully any surface war vessel ever built, while its submarine attributes will render it practically immune from any combination of force opposed to it. Do you see? Never again will England, when at war with Germany, be able to transport her armies abroad. Never again will she be able to feed her millions of people through overseas channels. Henceforth she will be driven to peace under any conditions and her mastery of the seas will pass from her forever."

Ruxton stirred in his seat. He shifted his position. The man's words had sunk deeply.

"The submersible mercantile marine is certainly the obvious retort," he said reflectively. Then he added as an afterthought, "Temporarily."

"Yes. Temporarily."

Neither spoke again for some moments. Both were thinking ahead, much further on than the immediate future.

"And after the submersible dreadnought?" Ruxton's question was not addressed to the inventor, but it was answered by him.

"Who can tell? One of these two countries *must* go under."

"Yes."

Again came a prolonged silence. Again Ruxton shifted his position. Then at last he spoke.

"And you will show me these things. The risk will be stupendous—for you."

Prince Stanislaus laughed without a shadow of mirth.

"For me it is just a matter of life and death. Life has few attractions for me now. For you? My power is sufficient to safeguard you. Shall I show you how?"

Ruxton nodded. His penetrating gaze was again fixed upon the almost cadaverous features with their snow-white crown and noble forehead.

"Yes," he said.

Prince Stanislaus began at once. And talk went on between them for many minutes. For the most part Ruxton listened, as was his way, and only occasionally interpolated a shrewd, incisive question. His dark, penetrating eyes were watchful and studying. And no change of expression in the other was lost upon him. Slowly within him there grew a wide admiration for the mentality and courage in this strangely simple creature. He read him down to the remotest depths of his honest soul. Wherever Prince Stanislaus's devotion to his life's work had led him, there was no shadow of doubt left in the Englishman's mind as to his present sincerity and honesty of purpose.

When the last detail of the plan had been explained Ruxton stood up.

"The judgment of the world is rarely inspired by justice," he said. "I thank you, and will gladly place myself under your guidance. Since the opportunity of discovering the secrets of Kiel and Cuxhaven has been vouchsafed to me I should be far less than the patriot I desire to be did I shirk the risks. My duty is quite plain."

The relief and satisfaction his words inspired in the other were obvious.

"I thank you," he said earnestly. "You have helped me to that peace which I have long sought and I had come to believe could never again be mine in this life. But ——"

"But?"

The man was smiling.

"But we do not go to either Kiel or Cuxhaven."

Ruxton was startled.

"Where then?" he demanded shortly.

"To the Baltic. Mr. Farlow, you have no idea of the subtlety of the people with whom we are dealing. All eyes of the world are on Cuxhaven and Kiel. Every vulture of the foreign secret services is hovering over those places, and the forges and foundries are working to deceive them. But the real work and preparations I speak of are not being made in Germany at all. We go to the Baltic, to the island of Borga, which is off the coast of Sweden. And there we shall find under German administration a naval 'Krupps,' and the greatest arsenal in the whole world."

CHAPTER VIII

BORGA

A GREY, northern day devoid of all sunshine; a forbidding, rock-bound coast lost in a depressing mist; a flat, oily sea, as threatening to the mariner as the mounting hillocks of storm-swept water; a dull sense of hopelessness prevailing upon the still air. All these things marked the approach to Borga; for Nature was in a repellent mood, a thing of repugnance, of distrust and fear.

A long, low craft was approaching the gaping jaws which marked the entrance to the heart of the island, somewhere away in the distance, lost in the grey mists which seemed to envelop the whole land.

The deck was narrow, and guarded by a simple surrounding of low rails. Amidships was a curious construction which was at once the support of the periscope, the conning-tower, and the entrance to the interior of the vessel. Dotted about the deck were several sealed hatchways, and the sheen of glassed skylights. The whole thing was colored to match the surrounding grey-green waters.

Two uniformed figures were standing for'ard in the bows. One of them was beating the air with twin flags, one in each hand. The other stood by contemplating the book in his hand, and at intervals scanning the repellent shore through a pair of binoculars.

Presently the signaller spoke.

"One, six, four, seven, nine, three, two," he said, reciting the combination of numerals in German with the certainty of familiarity.

"One, six, four, seven, nine, three, two, it is," replied the observer, in a similar, ill-spoken tongue. "That's 'proceed,'" he added, referring to his book.

Forthwith the signaller produced a pocket telephone connected with the conning-tower by a long insulated "flex," and spoke over it. A moment later the throb of engines made itself felt, and, in response, the spume broke on the vessel's cut-water, and left a frothing wake astern.

The vessel passed the mist-hooded granite headlands. It left them behind, and itself became engulfed in the grey threat lying between the overshadowing heights towering upwards nearly five hundred feet towards the leaden sky.

The two men on deck gave no heed to their immediate surroundings. They were men of the sea, hard and unimaginative. They were concerned only with the safety of the vessel under them. They would drive her into the very gates of Hell, if such were their orders. But they would avoid, with all their skill, the pitfalls by the way. They knew that the secrets of this gloomy abode were many, as many perhaps as those of the very Hades they would have been willing enough to face. They knew, too, that those secrets, just as the secrets of the other place, were calculated to destroy them if they diverged one iota from the laws which governed the place. So they worked exactly, and took no chances.

The channel quickly began to narrow. The vast cliffs drew in upon them in their overpowering might. The barren shores were visible to the naked eye, and the white line of heavy surf boomed and boomed again in its incessant attack upon the grim walls. Higher up small patches of pine trees clung desperately to insecure root-holds, like the intrepid Alpini seeking to scale impossible heights.

A few minutes passed and a boat, a small petrol-driven vessel, like some cockle-shell amidst its tremendous surroundings, shot out from the shore and raced towards them. It had a high, protected prow, and its great speed threw up a pair of huge white wings of water till it had something of the appearance of an enraged swan charging to the attack of an enemy. Again the signaller spoke over his telephone, and the vessel slowed down, and finally hove-to.

The patrol boat drew alongside. Two men, amidships, in oilskins, held a brief conversation with those on board the intruder. Then their vessel passed ahead, and the bigger craft was left to amble leisurely along in its wake.

The cliffs had closed down till less than half a mile of water divided them. The narrow strip of leaden sky above looked pinched between them. For a mile and more ahead there was no change. The narrow passage, with its racing tide, was full of hidden dangers, not the least amongst which being a crowded mine-field which lined either side of the channel.

As the journey proceeded the gloom increased. Added to the natural mists the atmosphere took on a yellow tint, which suggested an overhanging pall of smoke. There was no joy in the aspect anywhere.

The end of the passage came at last, and the pilot boat dropped astern. Its work was finished, and it raced back to its watching-post.

Now a complete change came over the scene. But it was scarcely a change for the better. It was only that Nature, having done her worst, left the rest in the safe hands of human ingenuity.

The frowning cliffs abandoned their threat. They ended as abruptly as they had arisen out of the sea. They fell back on either hand, carrying the shore with them, and merged into a mist-crowned hinterland of dark woods and wide ravines, with a wide-stretching foreshore, upon which was built a great city, entirely surrounding what had developed into a miniature, land-locked sea.

Nature had certainly left her incomplete effort in capable hands. Whatever beauty a brilliant sunshine, accompanied by a smart breeze, might have discovered upon the inhospitable shores of Borga in their pristine state, man's hand had contrived to destroy it. The whole prospect was sordid, uncouth, and suggested something of a nether world of lugubrious fancy. All that could be said for it was the suggestion of feverish industry on every hand. The buildings looked all unfinished, yet they were in full work under a great strain of pressure. Borga had been built in a hurry, and all connected with it suggested only haste and industry.

There were no public buildings of classic model. There were no roads and avenues beautified by Nature's decorations. Just alleys and thoroughfares there were, and only sufficiently paved for the needs of the work in hand. The quays and docks were solid—only. The great machine shops, staring-eyed and baldly angular, suggested only the barest necessity. And though their hundreds of floors sheltered thousands of human workers, and acres of elaborate machinery, not even a cornice, or coping, or variation of brickwork had been permitted to make sightly a structure purely for utilitarian purposes. The slipways at the water's edge, and the gaunt steel skeletons they contained, were merely slipways, without other pretensions. A thousand smokestacks belched out of their fetid bowels an endless flow of yellow, sulphurous smoke upon an already overladen atmosphere. They stood up like the teeth of a broken comb, and added to the sordidness of the picture.

A faint relief might have been found for the primitive mind in the numberless blast furnaces to be detected on almost every hand by their shooting tongues of flame. Like all else in Borga they never ceased from their efforts. Theirs it was to give birth to an everlasting stream of molten metal with which to fill the crudely-wrought sand moulds for the containing of pig-iron. The rolling mills, too, might have been not without effect. Those cavernous worlds of incessant clamor rolled the hours and days away, and took no count but of the output from their soulless wombs. The homes of the deep-noted steam hammers, and the fierce puddling furnaces, where men, bare to the skin except for a loin-cloth, with greased bodies, endure under showers of flying sparks and a heat which no other living creature would face. These sights were perhaps not without inspiration. But the sordidness of it all, its crudity, its suggestion of hideous life were on every hand; in the shrieking locomotives, with their tails of laden, protesting trucks; in the beer-drinking booths; in the vast heaps of rubbish and waste lying about in every direction; even to the almost bestial type of man whose brain and muscle made such a waste of industry possible.

What Nature had left unfinished, man had surely completed for her. Borga was repellent. Its life was ugly. But ugliest of all was its purpose.

Essen had been the greatest arsenal of all time. But since the birth and maturity of Borga it had become as a village compared to a capital city. Borga was the mechanical soul of an empire. It was the iron heart of an armored giant, upon which had been wantonly lavished all the mentality and spiritual force of a nation bankrupt in every other human feeling.

The incoming vessel moved swiftly. Ahead lay a grey breakwater which formed one wall of a small harbor. An open channel clear of all shipping indicated its purpose. It was obviously the official landing-place. However, if the channel remained clear it was lined on either side by a swarm of naval craft, much of which was still in the hands of artificers; for here, no less than ashore, the din of construction was going on and the busy hive remained true to its purpose.

The men on deck remained indifferent to their surroundings. Familiarity left them free to give undivided attention to their work. So the boat glided silently in between the pierheads, and, in five minutes, was lying against the landing-stage with a gangway run aboard.

Two men emerged from the conning-tower and stepped ashore, where a small group of uniformed officers were waiting to receive them. Prince Stanislaus von Hertzwohl led the way, followed by a younger man, whose face was full of a keen intelligence, while his dark eyes were those of a dreamer. Both were dressed in the uniform of German naval officers, a uniform which particularly seemed to suit the younger man's fair hair.

But the Prince in Borga was a different man from the inventor displaying his models. Here he was an autocrat —an all-powerful, high officer in the work of the place. Therefore, with a cold acknowledgment of the salute of the junior officers, he passed them by and stepped up to a man of elevated military rank, who, in the haughty aloofness of his position, was standing well apart from the others.

The Prince addressed him with a cold sort of familiarity.

"Ha, Von Salzinger," he cried, "but you are a troublesome people here. You give us no peace. We are called to straighten out the muddles of Borga when our time can be ill spared from our workshops. Let me present my nephew, who is responsible for this damnation light. Herr Leder von Bersac—the military governor of Borga, Captain-General von Salzinger."

The two men acknowledged the presentation, and their eyes met in a steady, keen regard. Then the Prince went on —

"What is it, this light? Have your engineers no thoughts in their heads but beer, or is it that they, like the asses, have grown long ears? Come, we will go at once. You can dismiss your ceremonial," he went on, indicating the group of officers. "I have no time for that. I am an engineer, as is my nephew. Besides, I must leave here within the hour. I must be in Berlin within two days and return to my works first. So——"

"Certainly, Excellency," replied the Captain-General, unbending before the man whom he believed through his genius to be the most powerful influence in the country at the moment. "But I think the fault is not with us—

this time. No doubt Herr von Bersac will be able to set the matter right. But an hour is short."

"Ach, so," cried the Prince, with irritation. "Then do not delay. Lead us to the—place."

Herr von Bersac, watching the scene with his dreamy eyes, noted the attitude of the two men towards each other. His uncle's manner was something of a surprise to him. Nor could he help but realize the other's almost slavish deference, as, in response to the older man's order, he hastily moved off shorewards.

The Governor was a typical Teuton. The broad, square back of his head surmounted a thick, fleshy neck. His blue eyes were deeply set in puffy sockets. His cheeks were full, and the chin, below his bristling moustache, was square and strong. His whole appearance, in his brilliant uniform, was of cubist inspiration, and, in spite of his high rank, and the suggestion of grey about the temples of his close-cropped head, he could not have been more than midway between thirty and forty. These things Herr von Bersac noted with almost unnecessary interest in spite of his abstracted air.

But Herr von Bersac had not had a monopoly of observation. While the Prince had been talking the military governor's small, quick eyes had not been idle. He had taken the nephew's measure to the last inch of his great height. Such observation was his habit as well as his duty. His position in the world's greatest secret arsenal demanded that every visitor must be regarded as a possible enemy until a due examination of his credentials proved him otherwise.

The Prince talked as they made their way to an execrable road by crossing a narrow-gauge railway. They skirted piles of debris almost as high as some of the adjoining buildings. And the general impression left was one of carelessness for anything but the work going on.

"This place is the worst constructed in the world," he declared, as he stubbed a toe against a pile of broken concrete. "There is no system in it. Where is the system for which we Germans are noted? It is gone, with many other things, since the war. We think so hard for the downfall of our enemies that we have no time for all that system which has made our people the greatest in the world. Ach! I hate Borga. I hate it more every time I make my visit."

Von Salzinger laughed in his heavy way.

"Ah, Excellency," he said, "the war has taught us many things. We thought we knew it all. Through that very system which was so great we wasted much money and many years, for our enemies achieved almost all which we had in less than two years. Now we work against time. Our object now is no longer system, but—result."

"I am glad," observed the Prince with some acerbity. "You will understand then why I can give you only an hour."

"Yes, Excellency," deferred the other.

He had no desire to add to his visitor's obvious ill-humor. And there were other reasons for his attitude than the mere fear of his power. He desired this man's personal favor. When war broke out in 1914, before the Prince had risen to his present power, he, Von Salzinger, had been brought into contact with his daughter Valita von Hertzwohl in the work of the Secret Service. It had fallen to his lot to endeavor to utilize her in his country's service. That his efforts had failed was not his only disaster, for, failing to enlist her coöperation, he had achieved her displeasure with himself. And her displeasure had disturbed him more than the other. He had fallen a victim to her charms in a manner which made her displeasure something of a tragedy to his vanity. But he was as vain as he was persevering, and with him effort was a continuous process, and not spasmodic.

The Prince hurried him through the wilderness of industry, and the haughty military governor lost much of his dignity in the scurry, and in his effort to pay deferential attention to his visitor's incessant complaint. An overwhelming clanging of machinery, intensified by the dull thunderous boom of adjacent steam hammers, and the machine-gun rattle of the riveting hammers, made talk almost impossible.

Herr von Bersac no longer displayed the least interest in his companions. Since he had dropped behind them, and was safe from Von Salzinger's observation, the dreaming had passed out of his dark eyes. They were alight with a keen interest, an interest almost excited, as the wonders of the place revealed themselves to him. But the works and their busy life had less effect than other things. His whole mind seemed to be absorbed in the direction of the water, and the numberless naval craft lying at their moorings. And out of all these his searching eyes selected one type, a type he could not miss, a type which seemed to be prevailing.

One of them lay so near inshore that he could observe its every detail of outward construction. It was a curious, ugly vessel of strangely vicious type. He recognized it at once as of the submersible pattern of the vessel he had arrived at Borga in. But it was so huge. It was heavily armored, as it lay there in light draught, high out of water, and on its deck, in place of the simple conning-tower and surmounting periscope, there was a central armored turret, while, fore and aft of this, two other turrets bristled, each with a pair of 12-inch guns. He had no time for a closer inspection as he was hurried along, but he made a mental note that the vessel was a submarine dreadnought, and that there were nearly fifty other such vessels lying about at their moorings.

He seemed fearful of concentrating his observation too long in any one direction. A furtive backward glance from the Governor promptly diverted his attention. It almost seemed that he had no desire to invite Captain-General von Salzinger's regard. No doubt he felt that, though his uncle's nephew, he was still only admitted to Borga on sufferance.

Finally they approached a high-walled enclosure with closed gates, and a line of sentries guarding its entrance. Immediately he became absorbed in the German characters of the large printed notice on the gates. The notice was to the effect that all entrance to this place without a Governor's permit was "verboten."

He became alert and watchful. Doubtless being the engineer responsible for the success of the new U-rays lamp he felt that he must no longer permit his interest to wander. He watched the square figure of the military governor as he took the sentry's salute. He observed the junior officer who promptly threw open one of the massive gates. Then his whole attention became absorbed in what he beheld as, with his companion, he passed within the enclosure.

It was a large dock. And moored at each of its three sides was a submarine dreadnought of even greater dimensions than the one he had seen mounting 12-inch guns.

The Prince turned to him.

"This, my Leder, is the place where we deal with the things, the secret of which the world will never know, but the effects of which one day our enemies will learn to dread."

He laughed with the satisfaction of anticipated triumph. Then, as Leder von Bersac grunted out some unintelligible acquiescence, he turned to the military governor with a shrug.

"Ach, what will you?" he cried, in apparent disgust. "He has no delight, no appreciation for these things. He will think all day. He will work in his light-rooms till he is nearly blind. All for the destruction of our enemies. But joy? He does not know it. If you tell him his work has slain a million of the enemy he will say he can make it kill more. Himmel! Such joy!"

Ludwig von Salzinger surveyed this enthusiastic product with curious eyes. But he offered no comment, and the Prince hurried towards the gangway, and led the way aboard the nearest vessel.

At the steel doorway of the armored conning-tower he paused. His whole manner abruptly changed to one of definite command.

"If there should be a defect we will have the light unshipped, and take it back with us, Leder," he said decidedly. "You cannot work in the pandemonium of Borga. It is only fit for the Captain-General's artillerymen, who have ears of leather and brains of mud." Then he turned upon Von Salzinger in a manner that permitted no doubt of his purpose. "You doubtless have more pressing duties, Herr Captain-General. Please do not consider us. Our work is technical, and will have but little interest for you. Besides, my dear Leder may have to examine those secrets of the U-rays which even your chief engineer is not admitted to. I thank you for conducting us hither. You will leave word for our safe departure at the gates."

His dismissal came as a shock to Von Salzinger. But more than anything his vanity was shocked. To feel that this man had the power to dismiss him, here in Borga, as he, Von Salzinger, might dismiss one of his junior officers, was infinitely galling. But even more intensely galling was the thought that this boor of a nephew could calmly move about in Borga, penetrate its most secret workshops, and probe the secrets which lay therein, while he—he, the military governor—was ordered about his business.

There was no help for it. Prince von Hertzwohl had given the order, and he must obey as though the order had issued from the lips of the All High War Lord. He bowed a short, square, resentful bow and stood aside to allow Von Bersac to enter the conning-tower. But the glance which followed the tall athletic form of the engineer was no friendly one.

He must obey orders. Well, so must everybody who entered Borga—unless they were of higher rank than the military governor. This young man could at least be put to the indignity of the inquisitorial process of his officials. And he knew how unpleasant their efforts could be made. He promised himself this trifling satisfaction, at least—when the Prince chanced to be out of the way. It was certainly his duty that this young man should go through the customary process which all visitors at Borga were submitted to.

He left the deck of the dreadnought as the Prince and his *protégé* vanished down the steel companionway, and passed out of the docks. Nor did he neglect to give the necessary orders for his visitors' departure. After that, however, he went straight to his headquarters.

Meanwhile the Prince, without the least hesitation, led his companion along the steel passages, past the maze of machinery which formed the bowels of the dreadnought. At the extreme peak of the vessel was situated the light-room of the U-rays, where they found four engineers at work.

The men saluted and stood by when they realized the identity of their visitors, and the work of examining the mechanism of the wonderful new submarine light at once began.

Von Bersac took small enough part in it. The Prince at once became the engineer. The skill and deftness, and the knowledge he displayed were incomparable. He talked the whole time he was examining, finding fault here, praising there, and all his talk was addressed to his nephew as though he were the final authority. Von Bersac remained the unenthusiastic creature he had appeared before Von Salzinger, and kept to his attitude of disjointed grunts. But his eyes were alert and apparently comprehending, and when, in imitation of the other, he examined any detail, there was a disarming conviction about all his movements. Finally they tested the light, and, after a number of tests, the Prince threw up his hands in a gesture of almost ludicrous despair.

"Ach, Leder," he cried, "it is not the fault of these good fellows. It is yours—yours and mine. It is a month's delay at least, is it not so?"

Von Bersac silently acquiesced.

"A month of most valuable time," the Prince went on. "See here," he cried, and went off into a world of technicalities beyond even the comprehension of the skilled engineers present. "It is to be regretted," he finished up despairingly. "It must be taken down, and sent back to us. But these, these,"—he laid his hands on two portions of the delicate mechanism enclosed in polished brass cylinders, through which the insulated cables passed—"we will take these with us. They can be trusted in no other hands." He turned to the chief engineer. "Take these out without delay. Herr von Bersac will wait for them, and convey them to my ship. There will be no difficulty. Sever the cables here, and here," he added, indicating spots which the engineer chalked where he was to cut them. "Do not let any one handle them when they are down, Leder. Bring them yourself."

The tall figure of the Prince departed, and Leder von Bersac remained while the engineers carried out the work.

It was quite simple. There was no difficulty. The Prince had made certain of this before he left his nephew to wait for the two cylinders. But the men worked with great care, for they knew that in those two simple brass casings lay the vital secrets which were to transform the submarine dreadnoughts from lumbering, groping sea monsters into live, active, vicious creatures of offense.

It was just within the hour when Leder von Bersac passed out of the dockyard gates bearing the two brass cylinders in his arms, and received the salutes of the sentries. He remembered the method with which the Captain-General had received them, and responded in similar fashion.

He passed on hurriedly in the direction of the landing-stage. Twenty yards from the dock gates an expression of doubt crept into his eyes, as he caught sight of a military officer hurrying towards him from the direction of what looked like a miniature fortress.

However, he gave no sign. He continued his way. He could already see the grey wall of the harbor ahead. But the man was rapidly overhauling him, and, in Von Bersac's mind, a calculation was going on as to whether he could reach his uncle's vessel before the officer came up with him.

This calculation, however, did not prove to his satisfaction. He knew he would be intercepted before he reached his destination. And the thought strangely disturbed him.

Just as he was about to step on to the landing-stage the officer reached his side and saluted.

He spoke at once, and though his manner was perfectly deferential, it was quite decided.

" Will Herr von Bersac favor the Captain-General with a visit at his headquarters before leaving? The Captain-General requests that he will make it convenient—at once. It is the formal matter of registering his visit to Borga."

The dark eyes of the tall engineer dwelt for a moment upon the immobile features of the man before him. He saw the authority of the military governor in the whole swaggering pose of the man, and, for a moment, his firm lips tightened. Then, as though by a great effort, overcoming his reluctance for the waste of words, he displayed an almost unexpected urbanity.

"It will give me very great pleasure to wait upon the Captain-General—at once," he replied. "It will be necessary, however, for me to deposit these in our vessel—in safety—before I do so." He indicated the cylinders. "You will understand when I assure you they are the most vital portions of our U-rays light. Perhaps you will favor me with your company as far as the vessel?"

The officer's pose underwent a slight change. His manner became even less deferential.

"My orders are—at once," he objected.

Von Bersac's manner remained the same, but his dark eyes looked straight into the other's.

"Quite so. Doubtless my uncle, Prince von Hertzwohl, will exonerate you for the brief delay. He is on the boat at this moment."

The words were well calculated. The engineer had thought rapidly and made his decision with lightning celerity. He knew that he must reach the vessel lying less than one hundred yards away.

He had his reward, and a slight sigh of relief escaped him. The military insolence had left the other's manner. The mention of the Prince's name had created a modified atmosphere. After all he was a mere Prussian officer accustomed all his life to yielding to authority. He, like every one else in Borga, knew that even the military governor must yield to the authority of the Prince. Therefore he yielded.

"It will give me the greatest pleasure to—accompany you," he said.

CHAPTER IX

THE FRIENDLY DEEP

PRINCE VON HERTZWOHL looked up from his bureau. He was sitting in his stateroom, which was of some considerable size, and opened out of the saloon. His ears had caught the sound of a hasty entrance of the latter. His luminous eyes were alert and questioning. The man was completely changed from the simple inventor who had told the story of his submersible to Sir Andrew Farlow and his son. There was a restless, nervous tension about him, altogether at variance with his customary calm.

He leapt from his seat. His thin, bent figure moved almost electrically towards the door. The next moment he had entered the saloon. The other side of the room, and just within the entrance doorway, stood Ruxton Farlow, still clad in his German naval uniform, and still bearing in his arms the two brass cylinders. There was an urgent look in his eyes, and, at the sight of it, the Prince's question came sharply.

"What is it?" he demanded, with the imperiousness of a man accustomed to high command.

"Von Salzinger," replied Ruxton quickly. A laugh followed his pronouncement. It was the laugh of a man who is alive to the danger of a situation.

"Yes?" The Prince's further enquiry was surcharged with eagerness, and in broad contrast.

"He demands my presence. I have to conform to regulations and register my visit to Borga at—headquarters. He has sent an officer to conduct me to him—at once. The officer is awaiting me on the landing-stage. The situation has possibilities."

Ruxton's outward calm was not shared by his companion. The Prince displayed his realization of the necessities of the moment. His eyes were bright and concentrated. Ruxton watched the emaciated features with their crowning, upright white hair. There was an ominous sparkle beneath the bushy brows.

"I saw it in Von Salzinger's eyes when I sent him off," the Prince said at last. "That is why I left you. Had his order come in my presence, while ashore, it would have been awkward. That is also why I left you to bring those cylinders, and with instructions to bring them straight here. I knew you would make this vessel *with me on board*." He pressed an electric bell in the panelling.

A moment later a uniformed officer appeared. He stood awaiting the Prince's commands. The latter seemed absorbed in thought. Quite abruptly he broke the silence with a series of sharp orders.

"Send a man ashore at once, Captain Ludovic. There is an officer waiting there with certain orders from the Captain-General. Convey to him my compliments, and ask him to step aboard as I wish him to convey an important message to the military governor. For yourself, you will stand-by. The moment he enters the tower you will have the moorings cast off. Just keep the boat held to the quay fore and aft by light lines which can be released at a moment. When the officer reappears you will, the instant he has passed ashore, clear the gangway, cast off the light moorings, and full power ahead out of the harbor. I do not know the effect of my message on the military governor, but I expect he will endeavor to stop me. This must not be permitted. You understand?"

"Yes, Excellency." The man offered no further comment.

"For the present that is all."

The man saluted and retired.

"Is that man a German, or a ——?" Ruxton began as the man disappeared.

"He is a Pole." Then the Prince clasped his fingers and bent them back, cracking the joints. It was an expression of intense excitement. He laughed. "He hates Prussians, and Von Salzinger is a Prussian."

"The matter is going to be serious?" Ruxton's eyes searched the smiling face of the Prince.

"I cannot tell—yet. Von Salzinger has given an order that is about to be disobeyed. Von Salzinger is a powerful force in Borga. Even I have no right to disobey the military governor's regulations here, nor to defy openly his orders. Von Salzinger may do anything. Remember, he is a Prussian. One thing is certain, he does not get you before his inquisitors. No, I cannot tell what he will do. Ah, here comes our visitor. Give me the cylinders."

The Prince possessed himself of the cylinders and was closely contemplating them when the youthful Prussian officer appeared in the doorway. He was so intent upon his study of them, tenderly handling their shining cases with his long fingers, that he did not appear to observe the officer's entrance, and, in gently modulated voice, continued to address his pretended nephew.

"You have, my dear Leder, committed the great fault which belongs to your age. Practice and Principle must ever go hand in hand. I do not know yet, of course, but I fear you have let Principle get his nose in front of Practice. It may mean much serious delay. We will take these, and have them more fully tested, and then ——"

He broke off and looked up as an impatient clearing of the throat announced the presence of the officer. In a moment the cylinders were deposited on the table, and the big eyes were beaming simple kindliness upon the visitor.

"You have an order from the Captain-General, is it not so?" he enquired blandly.

The young Prussian pulled himself up with due regard for his office. Just for a moment his conceit had been a little overborne by the presence of the Prince.

"Yes, Excellency," he said, with a sharp return to his military habit. "It is an imperative order that I conduct, without delay, Herr Leder von Bersac ——"

"Ach, so!" exclaimed the Prince, his eyes suddenly flashing and his whole manner absorbing all his recent blandness in a quick-rising heat. "Does the Captain-General think he can give his orders to men under the command of Prince von Hertzwohl? Your Captain-General has yet to learn. And those who serve under him also. My nephew, Herr Leder von Bersac, is under the command of his uncle, and no one else. Your Captain-General knows that as well as I. The regulations of Borga are no concern of mine. But when I visit this pestilential place its manners are. Convey to your Captain-General that the manners of Borga had best be improved. I shall not visit here again until I have seen that they are. You can go back, and tell him that I leave at once, and that Herr Leder von Bersac has no time to comply with any order issued by the military governor of Borga."

The tide of the Prince's anger was too swift for the youthful Prussian's armor of official effrontery. He came near to withering before it. It was only the understanding of Von Salzinger's supreme command in Borga that helped him to weather the storm. He waited one moment to see if anything further was to be said, then, under the stern eyes of the Prince, he saluted and departed, darting up the companionway with hurried steps, and made his way ashore to the telephone station on the landing-stage.

Had he paused to glance about him he might have been surprised that the Prince's threat had been so promptly put into execution. As it was he did not notice even that the gangway followed him ashore, almost immediately in his wake. But these things, however they might have surprised him, were no real concern of his. It was for him to report promptly to the Captain-General, and make matters as safe as he could for himself.

By the time he reached the telephone station the vessel was gliding silently from the landing-stage.

The throb of the powerful engines told Ruxton Farlow all he wished to know. He sighed quietly, and it was the outward expression of the relaxing of his feelings.

He was smiling into the face of the man before him.

"Well?" he said.

But the Prince had become curiously abstracted. His eyes were on the cylinders in an unseeing contemplation. Ruxton watched him thoughtfully after his monosyllabic interrogatory. He was filled with not a little wonder at the alertness of this man's mentality in a moment of crisis. It was an almost confounding realization in the midst of his early impressions of him. For himself he could not see ahead with any degree of certainty. The Prince had committed himself to a dangerous course in defying the German Government's representative in the place, which was the most treasured secret in the Teuton heart. He judged that certain pursuit would follow, or at least armed interference. Even with a power such as the Prince's, at whatever cost, Von Salzinger must enforce obedience to his order, or ——

The Prince broke in upon his reflections.

"It is good to defy a—Prussian. It did me much good. But Borga is his nursery. He is its nurse. He must act. I wonder —— Ach, if he should try to stop us I will see him in the deepest pit of hell."

He threw up his hands with his final explosion and in an action of almost schoolboyish delight. Then he smiled into the Englishman's face, half questioningly, half eagerly.

"Between us and the open sea lie a hundred batteries of heavy, compressed-air guns. One shell from any of those guns could send us to the bottom, if it caught us at the surface. Then there is the mined channel. We are without a pilot. If we submerge the mines are thicker still. For myself and my vessel I do not care. For you?"

Ruxton shrugged.

"If I am caught and questioned I shall be shot. And you, too, for bringing me here. A gambler's chance is always attractive, even to a man who never gambles."

"Then we amuse ourselves at the expense of our friend Von Salzinger. When you are safe in England I will forestall him in Berlin. I have no fear when you are—safe. Let us go on deck."

Five minutes later they were standing on the deck of the submersible. They were standing at the rail, with the conning-tower intervening between them and the shore. They were the only souls visible on the deck. The captain of the vessel was in the turret, but the crew were all below.

Ruxton observed this at once, as he also observed that the skylights were all sealed ready for submersion.

"Your captain is ready for any emergency," he said, indicating these preparations.

But the Prince was searching the harbor side of the shore with a pair of powerful glasses.

Receiving no reply Ruxton permitted his attention to wander over the rapidly passing panorama. They were travelling very fast, and a great white wake was thrown up behind them. The moored shipping dropped astern of them at an almost incredible speed. Ahead he could see the frowning narrows coming towards them shrouded in their gloomy hood of mist, like the cowled skulls of skeleton sentinels. But even such a threat was preferable to the intolerable, sulphurous atmosphere they were leaving behind.

"There is no movement from the shore," said the Prince presently, lowering his glasses. Then he passed into the conning-tower to confer with his chief officer.

In a few moments he returned.

"He thinks it is the narrows where we shall be held up. He says the Captain-General would not believe a Pole would face that mine-field. Perhaps it is that he is right —Ludovic, I mean. We will wait." Then he rubbed his hands with absurd glee. "It is interesting."

Ruxton was forced to smile. A delightful sensation of excitement was growing within him again. He had told himself that it was life or death, but the full significance of his assurance had been powerless to possess him. He had often dreamed of Death. He had imagined it in almost every form. Nor, in his dreams, had it ever succeeded in terrifying him any more than the thought of it did now.

No, the whole situation had contrived an impersonal atmosphere for himself. He was looking on, watching a great contest between the brain of this man, his courage and soul, against the military rule and power of the Captain-General Von Salzinger.

A low chuckling laugh broke upon his reflections.

"It is an illustration," said the Prince, his eyes now steadily fixed upon the jaws of the narrows ahead.

"The test is even greater than I could have hoped. We are an unarmed submersible merchantman. Such as we have talked of. Here we are, under the enemy's batteries—at war. We are carrying butter, hey? Butter to your shores, in war time, in face of a blockade. Your countrymen are starving for—butter. We must reach them, and so save your country from destruction—with butter."

"Make it copper, Prince," smiled Ruxton.

"Ha! Yes, copper. It is very necessary in war time."

The Prince smiled in appreciation. Then he pointed ahead. "But see, Ludovic is right."

He was indicating a dark object moving towards them on the water out of the gloomy shadows of the rocky sentries of the narrows.

"It is a patrol. Under normal conditions it would gladly pilot us through the mine-field. Now it has no such friendly desire."

His regard became less smiling, and he relapsed into silence. The dead flat water was thrown up into two great wings as the patrol boat pressed on towards them.

The excitement was more and more taking possession of the Englishman. His faith in the Polish prince was invincible.

"Shall you hear what he has to say?" he enquired presently, his breathing quickened in spite of an outward calm.

The Prince did not turn to answer, but his slight laugh was full of quiet confidence.

"Why waste time—valuable time?" he retorted whimsically. "We are in a hurry to reach the open sea. No, I do not listen to the Captain-General's commands to me. He is my subordinate." Then he added with the ingenuous subtlety of a schoolboy, "If I listened to the order to stop, and refused to obey, I should commit myself in the eyes of Berlin. No. Come below. It is time."

The patrol boat was less than four hundred yards away, and travelling at a great pace. It was almost within hailing distance. Ruxton could even count the occupants at that distance. He was certain there were six at least. The other patrol boat had contained only two officers besides the engineer. The difference was significant.

He followed his host into the conning-tower and the steel door was closed with a slam behind them. It automatically sealed itself.

The Prince's voice at the foot of the steel companion-ladder, leading up to the chief officer's post, rang out sharply.

"Submerge!"

Then he turned to his companion.

"We will go below. We will go forward, where Ludovic will join us in a moment. I will show you that which I hope may interest you. We have seen the last of Von Salzinger and his command—for some time."

The nervous energy of the Prince led Ruxton at a rapid rate. They passed down the companion, and, instead of entering the saloon, turned for'ard, down an alleyway which took them past the moving steel bowels of the vessel. The low purr of the great Diesel engines fell pleasantly upon the Englishman's ears. There was no hiss of steam. There was none of the clanging of high-pressure mechanism. Just a steady, powerful throb which vibrated throughout the length of the vessel's hull, and told him of the enormous mechanical effort going on.

They left the engine-rooms behind and passed by the kitchens, to which very careful and elaborate attention had been given. They left the quarters of the crew, beautifully kept and equipped, and without a sign or suggestion of that inferiority of appointment which is to be found on all commercial vessels. They passed a number of carefully disguised bulkheads, and finally came to a doorway in a steel bulkhead which seemed to mark the limit of the forward end of the vessel. The Prince withdrew a key from his waistcoat pocket. He opened the door, and both of them passed within.

Once the door was closed he slid his fingers up the steel wall in the darkness and pressed a switch. In a moment the room was flooded with light, and Ruxton blinked under its power as he gazed about him.

The Prince was standing in front of him gazing half smilingly at the expression of his face. He was seeking that surprise which to his simple nature meant much satisfaction.

Nor was he disappointed. The moment Ruxton recovered under the dazzling glare he realized that that which he now beheld he had witnessed in the vessel at Borga, whence he had brought the cylinders. This was the U-rays room of the private submersible. It was—yes, it was the U-rays in active operation.

A question promptly sprang to his lips.

"But the light is perfect," he said. "There is nothing wrong with it here?"

He moved across the narrow triangular room to its apex, where a great disc of magnifying glass, like a port-hole, came in direct contact with the water outside. He stood for a moment peering out through it. The water beyond was lit with a ruddy glow that left it extraordinarily translucent. It was powerful, and seemingly the power of the rays extended a considerable distance. But though the water was thus lit it was not rendered transparent. For some silent moments he gazed out, then a shadow moved across the field of light—and he understood.

He turned to the silent inventor.

"That was a fish which crossed our bows," he said, in suppressed tones which indicated something of his feelings. "I think—yes, I understand. This light will reveal any solid body ahead, any obstruction—mines, rocks, any danger to progress."

The Prince beamed his satisfaction.

"The submersible need no longer be a blind lumbering monster," he said. "The mine-field we are shortly going to pass through is not the danger you may have anticipated. The moment we have passed the patrol boat we shall rise till our periscope is above water. Then we shall move slowly. The helmsman will remain in the conning-tower, but he will be controlled from here by —— Ah, here is Captain Ludovic."

The steel door was thrust open and the chief officer entered the room.

"The mines begin about sixty fathoms on, Excellency," he said, with a brevity and utter lack of anything approaching the servility one might have anticipated in his relation to so powerful a master as the Prince. But Ruxton understood. The Prince's simple nature demanded nothing of that from those intimately associated with him. Hence, perhaps, the devotion of those who served him. "If you will forgive, Excellency, I will take *sole* charge here."

The Prince turned to his guest with a laugh of genial humor.

"Come, my friend, we will leave the excellent Ludovic to his work. We are dismissed." Then he turned to the captain, who had taken his place at the forward porthole, and had adjusted the telephone receivers over his ears. He raised his voice so that the man could hear.

"Once clear of the last batteries, Ludovic, we travel on the surface," he said.

"Yes, Excellency." The man made no attempt to turn from his watch upon the ruddy field ahead.

CHAPTER X

THE FUTURE

On the way back to the saloon a further truth began to dawn upon Ruxton. Nor did he lose a moment in challenging his host when they reached the luxurious apartment.

"You have brought those cylinders away. May I ask why?" he enquired.

The Prince had seated himself, and was in the act of lighting a cigar. He desisted, and held his case out towards his guest. Ruxton helped himself and waited.

The other stared thoughtfully at the cigar which remained poised in his lean fingers. Then he raised his brilliant eyes, and the Englishman realized that the moment of lightness, of almost schoolboyish delight at the sense of danger had entirely passed. The eyes shone passionately, and reminded him sharply of the expressive eyes of the woman who had appealed for humanity with him on the brink of the Yorkshire cliffs.

"Why? Because I have convinced you of my submersible. Because for that reason I have determined to deprive the German Government of the use of my U-rays for an indefinite period. Perhaps forever. Listen, there is only one man knows that I have an installation of that light on my ship besides ourselves, and that man is—Ludovic. I have installed it with my own hands. The installation on the submersible dreadnought which you saw was the first effort in that direction, and the Government believe it to be purely experimental. Well, the experiment has—failed. That is all." He shrugged.

"But you will be forced to try again."

"And it will fail—again. Ach, so! I would rather unship my plant, and fling my models to the bottom of the sea, where they may help to light up the world of crabs, than that my Government should acquire one single added threat against humanity."

The next few moments were silently occupied in lighting their cigars. Ruxton had no words with which to answer him. He was thinking deeply, comparing this man's attitude towards the country which claimed him with his own feelings for his island home. He wondered what his attitude would have been had their positions been reversed; if he, as an Englishman, had been such a power, through his discoveries, for aiding his country. To his shame he was forced to the conclusion that this white-haired Pole was a greater man than he could ever hope to be.

The difference between them lay in the difference between a perfervid patriotism, and the Prince's overwhelming love of humanity inspired by the abyss of horror into which a blind devotion to his country had flung him. This man had passed the great dividing line where the uplifted spirit renounces the claims of earthly passion in favor of the call of the voice of the soul. The cause of humanity now dominated every other emotion. Somehow his own fervor of patriotism suffered severely by the comparison, and so he found himself with no words in which to answer.

The old man rose from his chair and passed into his private stateroom. A few moments later he returned with two rolls of papers, neatly secured by tapes and seals.

He had closed the door. He was about to cross over to his guest. But in a moment he was held rigid where he stood. A dull boom roared out somewhere overhead and vibrated down the entire length of the vessel.

His eyes were wide and attentive. But there was no fear in them. Ruxton started up from the lounge on which he had been sitting. A thrilling excitement shone in his eyes.

"Is it a—mine?" he cried sharply.

The Prince shook his head.

"There would be nothing of us left at this moment," he said. "Wait! You can feel the steady throb of the engines. No, it was a gun. It was a bursting shell from one of the silent guns. They can see our periscope, and are firing across us—to heave to. Hark! There goes another."

Again came a terrific detonation. But the vessel ploughed on.

"Presently they will fire to hit our periscope and make us rise to the surface. Von Salzinger has gone further than I had dared to hope."

"Hope?"

"He will pay for this with his position."

"But if they hit our periscope?"

The Prince shrugged.

"It will make no difference. We shall not rise till it suits us. We have the light. Already we must be nearly through the mine-field. Once we are through the mines Ludovic could make the journey seawards blindfold."

The Prince crossed over to his chair, and laid the sealed rolls on the table beside him. He did not speak. He was obviously listening.

Presently another sharp explosion sounded overhead, and his eyes lit.

"Ah, I thought Von Salzinger would not resist it. You see, he is a Prussian." He smiled, but his eyes had lost their humor. "That was shrapnel," he went on. "Its bursting is unmistakable. But he will not hit the periscope."

Again silence fell between them, and both smoked on with every sense alert. There was another explosion overhead. Then another and another. Still the vibrations of the engines continued. The two waited some time for the next explosion, but it was delayed. At last the Prince rose from his seat and passed out of the room. He was away for some moments. During his absence Ruxton never stirred a muscle. His cigar had gone out. He was still listening acutely.

Finally the Prince returned, and Ruxton's eyes put their question plainly.

"We have completely passed the mine-field. We are also completely submerged," said the Prince. "We need no longer concern ourselves with Von Salzinger."

Ruxton drew a deep breath. He relit his cigar, while the other seemed to dismiss the subject from his mind entirely. The excitement of the escape had passed, and with the passing of it, it had robbed him of all lightness. His large eyes darkened, and a frowning of his bushy brows gave him an appearance of depression.

Ruxton, watching him, wondered what next was to be the display of this extraordinary creature. Nor had he long to wait.

"You have seen at—Borga?" he demanded.

"More—than I was prepared for, in spite of all you and the Princess had told me."

"Yes. Tell me. Tell me about it."

Ruxton drew his feet up on the lounge. His dark eyes were on the white-whiskered face of his host, but they had become deeply introspective.

"I wonder how many years we have before it—comes."

"Perhaps—ten."

"Ten? Yes, I suppose so." The Englishman's eyes were full of a deep pondering. "And then war. War upon Britain alone. The rest of the world cajoled into quiescence through self-interest, and the memory of the horrors of the late war. Yes, a sudden and swift descent upon our overseas commerce. The wholesale wrecking, and terrorizing by slaughter. Every ship bound for our shores must be captured or sunk. This must occur simultaneously in all parts of the world. Then the complete ringing round of these islands, and a naval warfare against us with this new type of battle-ship, the submersible dreadnought. From a naval point of view, with our own submarine vessels, doubtless it is calculated that we might hold our own. But meanwhile our islands would be starved, and our country brought to its knees. All our defences against submarine attack in the past would be rendered useless by the U-rays light. It is certainly a picture to intimidate the stoutest heart. And then? What lies behind this? I can see it in your eyes that—there is more behind it all."

The Prince leant forward with that swiftness of action which indicates a tumultuous stream of thought surging to find expression.

"Ach, that is so. That is all so. But you are right. There is more—much more," he cried, his lean hands tenaciously grasping the polished arms of his chair. "You have all talked world domination. You have all vaguely known that that was Germany's object in the last war, and in which she failed. No one knows better than Germany why she failed. It does not need the Englishman to remind her. Since then she has changed her whole plans, and now they are more far-reaching than ever. She has abandoned Napoleonic for the ancient Roman methods. Germany, once she has wrested sea power from Britain, will live in a state of war with the whole world. The procedure will be an attack upon, and annexation of, every small state in turn. And each small state so acquired will pay its own bill. She will consolidate each territory as she possesses it, and so long as her war methods continue they will be bled white. So she will build up in every corner of the earth, and in the process she will prosper exceedingly, as did the great Roman Empire. And throughout this reign of terror, while the outward seeming of civilization will increase a hundredfold, all spiritual life, and the culture of the human soul, will go back some two thousand years. We are this moment at the world's greatest crisis. One slip, one wrong move, and the great structure of the human soul will fall with a crash to the bowels of an abyss two thousand years deep. For the moment every seeing eye looks to Britain. For the moment, at this terrible crisis, Britain alone stands a bulwark that can save the human race from its tragedy. Salvation lies in the supremacy of the seas, which, thank God, is still in the keeping of your country. Britain must keep it. She must hold to it with all the bulldog tenacity for which she is famous. She must keep that mastery, not alone for her own security, but for the security of the whole human race!"

The man ran his lean fingers through his shock of white hair. And the action was an expression of relief from tension. A great light was shining in his eyes, a light which told Ruxton Farlow of the hot soul burning within. He knew, had known before, the truth of all this man had just stated, and the corroboration of his own knowledge, through the lips of another, fell with added weight.

He shifted his position. The urgency of all that had been said, all he had witnessed, now, as such things always did, drove him to considerations which bore actively upon the situation.

"Yes," he said, without emotion, "you have drawn a true picture. A picture which we, who care, have held in our imagination ever since the signing of that disastrous peace. Now I have witnessed for myself all that Germany is preparing." He paused, in deep thought, and the other waited anxiously.

"Let us consider now the risks and dangers of the moment," Ruxton went on again presently. He glanced up at the ceiling. The artificial lights were still shining. "We are still submerged. Therefore we are not yet in the open sea. A very real threat still hangs over us—over you. It will still hang over you when I am safely landed on my Yorkshire coast."

The shining light of the Prince's eyes was passing. His interest was not in his own safety. He shrugged.

"There is no danger for me. With Van Salzinger it is different."

"But you have broken the most vital of Borga's regulations. *Can* the German naval authorities overlook that? Will there be no question? Will you not be forced to produce your nephew to be confronted by—Von Salzinger?"

A look of doubt crept into the old man's eyes, and Ruxton knew that his warning had struck home.

"That possibility had not occurred to me," he said, with undisturbed simplicity.

For some moments Ruxton watched him in silence.

"How will you meet—that?" he demanded at last.

The man shrugged again.

"I must think of it. There will be a way."

"Just so. There is a way, Prince," said Ruxton, suddenly bestirring himself. "It is simple. Your real cause is the cause of humanity. Why not defy the claims of Germany? Abandon her, and yield your life to the cause so dear to your heart. Will you not land on the Yorkshire coast with me? A great welcome will await you. And—your daughter—she is in England already."

Having launched his appeal, Ruxton sat back in his seat and waited with a tense patience. Vast affairs were hanging in the balance, waiting upon the decision of this man, who was perhaps the mechanical genius of the country which claimed him.

After a while the Prince slowly shook his head. And the lack of impulse he displayed warned the other that his decision was irrevocable.

"No," he said. "To do so would be to destroy all the possibilities of the future for our cause. You will see. It is equally simple. Were I to abandon my work for Germany in the manner you suggest, they would know that I had betrayed them—and their secrets. All we have gained by the knowledge of their secrets would be lost. Then—though it matters nothing to me, for I do not value it beyond the help I can give to humanity—my life would be destroyed as sure as day follows night. No. I go back to my shops, and to my work. I will meet every emergency as it arises. Should I fall to this man Von Salzinger I can always beat the authorities, and—make my escape."

"You are sure?"

"Ach, yes."

"Then prepare from this moment for that escape. You will have to make it. Of that I am equally—sure."

Ruxton's eyes were smiling, but without lightness. And the two men smiled into each other's eyes for some silent moments.

The Prince was the first to break the spell. It was with a glance up at the skylight overhead.

"See," he cried, not without satisfaction. "There comes the daylight. We are on the high seas. All danger is past."

"Immediate danger," corrected Ruxton.

"Ach, so. Yes, 'immediate.'"

The old man turned to the two rolls of paper on the table beside him. He picked them up and fondled them tenderly with his long fingers. They were to him something very precious, and—he was about to part from them.

Suddenly he held them out towards his guest. The shining light had returned to his eyes. Again had mounted to that splendid brain the hot desire to speak from the bottom of his heart.

"Take them! Take them!" he cried passionately.

"They are my children. I give them for the world. They must grow, and do for the world all that I have dreamed of into their creation. They are the plans, drawn and written in English by my own hands. No eyes but mine have seen them, and there are no others in existence. They are the plans of the U-rays light, which, by taking from them the cylinders you brought away, I have robbed Germany of the use of, and the plans of this submersible. Safeguard them as you would your life, and lose not a moment in forcing your slow country to construct. We have agreed that you have ten years, and in ten years you can do much, if you do not let your country meanwhile sleep."

Ruxton took the proffered rolls and held them a moment while his eyes rested introspectively upon the seals.

"And the price?" he demanded, in a firm voice.

"The price! Himmel, the price!" The Prince threw up his hands in a gesture of dismay. "The price!" he repeated. "The price when humanity stands at the threshold of disaster! Ach! You are a true Englishman."

He rose from his seat and moved hurriedly across to his stateroom. At the door he paused and turned.

"There is no price," he said, and his big eyes were alight with a whimsical smile.

CHAPTER XI

BACK AT DORBY TOWERS

SIR ANDREW had listened patiently. His had been the grave attitude of a man impressed beyond mere words of agreement or understanding. His reading glasses had been thrust aside. His grey head was inclined towards his clasped hands, and his broad chin found support upon them. His whole poise was of the closest attention.

"It's like a—fairy-tale," he said at last as Ruxton's story came to an end, and the deep, calm tones of his voice died out.

"Or a—nightmare?"

"Ye-es."

Sir Andrew swung round in his ample library chair and faced his desk. It was the movement of a man stirred out of his customary calm.

Ruxton watched his father closely from his seat on the settle under the mullioned window. He was seeking the effect of his story upon a man whom he knew to be typically British at heart. He had seen it all, had experienced it all. His father had not.

Presently Sir Andrew faced him again.

"Now your—purpose," he demanded, with the air of crisp business. "You would set out to revolutionize our mercantile marine by the adoption of this—submersible."

"As rapidly as is compatible with commercial interests."

"You mean that we are to take the entire risk of the success of this new departure?"

"It is our contribution to our country's cause."

Then Ruxton drew a deep breath. He sat up, and his words came swiftly, passionately.

"There must be no hesitation, Dad. The submersible will be no failure. You must see this thing with my eyes, you must understand it with my understanding. What I would do is to take upon ourselves this first burden in the cause of patriotism. We must take the lead, cost us what it may. If the thing is a failure, then we are so much the poorer in this world's goods, but we shall have wrought honestly in the cause of our country. If it is the success I am sure of, then our gain is twofold. But even if the latter is fulfilled beyond my expectations it is not going to be the easy thing it looks. Listen. Hertzwohl believes that he can completely cover his tracks. I am just as certain that he cannot. Germany will discover the betrayal of her secrets. She will punish the offender in the complete manner of which she is so great a mistress. Then, by every art and wile of which she is capable, by every ruthless persistent purpose for which she is renowned, she will strive to undo the harm already achieved. We shall not be left to peaceful construction, if my understanding of the situation is correct. We may have to face even personal attack upon our lives and upon our ship-yards. It is with ideas of this sort running through my mind that I intend to lay the whole matter before the Cabinet. I intend to secure Government patronage and protection for this scheme. It is the only means by which we can hope to meet the attack which I am convinced will be forthcoming from our country's enemies. It is a lot to ask of you, Dad, at your time of life. Did I not know the great strength of your character, and the extreme loyalty you possess for our country, I should have shouldered the whole of this burden myself. As it is I know that with all your spirit you would have resented such a course. Therefore I lay it before you."

The older man made no attempt at agreement or denial. He sat drumming his fingers upon the edge of his desk while his keen eyes twinkled in his boy's direction. He understood the earnestness of the idealist. He saw the purpose in every line of the strong young face. He appreciated the perfect poise of the keen, fresh intellect. And for the moment his mind went back to the glimpse of Paradise which had been his during the brief period of his married life. This son of his was that splendid Russian woman over again, and he was glad. But when he spoke his manner had undergone no change from his crisp business practice.

"You would have us build ——?"

"Two vessels of three thousand tons each and incorporate them with our coastwise fleet. Then two deep-sea craft of say six thousand tons. I would lay these down at once. Once their success is proved the plans can be laid open to all our shipping world. When the time comes the Government must be induced to foster the new construction by subsidy, and by every other means in its power. But in the first instance we alone must bear the burden and all it involves. If disaster should overtake our efforts our justification remains. The days of Britain's pre-war ineptitude are so recent that even an active progressive failure would be a matter scarcely to be deplored. We must convince the world of the sincerity of our convictions, and, to do that, we must, if need be, risk our entire fortune. The danger we know lies ahead. In Britain it is useless to tell of it. Only our own actions can speak and carry convictions. It is our plain and simple duty to put our all into this thing. If it should bring us disaster or even simple ruin, I tell you, Dad, I would rather spend the rest of my life in honest rags, with the knowledge that my substance has been absorbed in an endeavor to help my country, than claim this beautiful home of ours as a view-point from which to watch the triumph of our country's enemies."

"Ye-es."

The twinkling eyes of Sir Andrew developed a smile upon his rugged Yorkshire features. But it was a smile of sympathy.

"The most thoroughly unbusinesslike transaction I was ever asked to countenance," he observed drily. "This sort of thing, as you have suggested, has come rather late in my life. But it only makes me regret my years. But tell me again of this man. His genius, his curious attitude of mind have left me rather breathless. This sort of thing in a German —— ?"

"Pole. There is not a drop of German blood in his veins." Ruxton caught eagerly at the opportunity of the man's defence. "His attitude, his personality, has left you no more breathless than it has left me. Dad, I have spent nearly a week in his company, a week spent in contact with the greatest mind it has ever been my good fortune to encounter. Nor do I think the mind is greater than the soul. Oh, yes, I know what the unthinking would say. They would think and speak of treachery. They would spurn the creature who could betray the country which claims him, the country which has bestowed wealth and rank upon him. They would talk of loyalty and honor, and so, in their shallow way, prove the vile thing he must be. But I tell you there is something terrible in the demand for allegiance to a country whose sole aim is conquest in every phase of life; not the peaceful conquest which springs from the higher intelligence and purity of soul, but the brutal conquest of bloodshed, rapine, and terror. The man who can detach himself from the commonplace understanding of honor, the man whose courage is such that he dares to outrage such understanding in the cause of humanity, is something approaching my understanding of a demi-god. If Prince von Hertzwohl is a traitor, then I would gladly be branded in a like manner."

The father permitted nothing of the effect of the idealist's words any expression. But he was not the less affected by them. However, he still bent all his mental force upon the practical side of the situation.

"And you believe this man's life will pay for his—for what he has done?"

"I am certain of it."

Sir Andrew drew a deep breath. The assurance carried conviction.

"I am so certain," Ruxton added, "that I offered him shelter here."

"He accepted?"

"On the contrary—he refused."

His father's manner softened.

"His courage is almost—tragic."

"Or sublime."

"When were the preparations at this Borga begun?" Sir Andrew asked a moment later.

"During the war." Ruxton gave a short hard laugh. "Borga was purchased to be used as an alternative base for submarine construction in case Kiel and Cuxhaven should be raided from the sea. Germany, even then, was looking far, far ahead."

"Yes."

For a few silent moments Ruxton's father continued to drum his fingers upon the desk before him. Then his keen eyes were raised again unsmilingly to his son's face.

"And the price? What price does he demand for these plans?" he enquired sharply.

Ruxton's eyes levelled themselves at his father's.

"There is no price."

The old man's busy fingers became suddenly still.

"No—price?"

"None. They are a gift—in the cause of humanity."

Sir Andrew ran his strong fingers through his snowy hair. A whimsical smile began to possess his eyes.

"You have left me more convinced than I had thought possible."

"Of the danger?"

"No—of the man."

"I am glad."

"In England, as elsewhere, humanity is generally helped at our neighbor's expense."

A flash of disapproval leapt into the younger man's eyes.

"If I did not know better, Dad, I should take you for ——"

"A cynic," broke in his father. Then he went on explosively. "Believe me, boy, I *am* a cynic where our country's splendid character, as depicted in song and verse, and the ha'penny press, is concerned. On the subject of our national characteristics the late war was enough to break the heart of the veriest optimist. As far as I can see only two things stood the test of that fire. The fighting power of our people and our naval record. For the rest, for the men whose duty it was to supply the moral support, well ——"

He broke off and leant across the desk and picked up the telephone receiver.

"Hello!" he called. "That you, McGrath? Good. Have you examined those ——? Yes. Can you come up and talk to us about them at once? Yes. Very well. Please do so."

He replaced the receiver and turned about. His keen eyes were regarding his son affectionately. There was pride in them, too. His only son represented the whole of his life's interests and ambitions.

"You have most of your life before you. Most of mine is behind me. You, my boy, have been brought up, as far as was possible to me, in all the simple, beautiful beliefs which belonged to your dear mother. I was brought up to the hard life of commercial competition, and all the moral looseness which that implies. As time goes on I fear many of your splendid temples and shrines will be shattered. This must be so, and it is right. With the passing of youth you will gain a true perspective of human worth. And when that perspective is attained, if

I have any understanding of my own son, he will not be unduly affected by it. That perspective is already mine, I believe, and, since I am first and foremost a commercial man, you will forgive me if I reduce my understanding to mere percentages. With exceptions, of course, I have found that human nature's sense of duty is made up of about 75 per cent. of regard for itself, 24 per cent. of regard for the duties of other people towards life, and about 1 per cent. of the milk of human kindness. So that —— Ah, here is McGrath."

Sir Andrew turned sharply from the amused gaze of his son to the newcomer. Ian McGrath was a powerfully built Scot. The sense of strength was displayed in almost every detail of his appearance. In his short, bristling, iron-grey hair, his extremely decided, plain features; the deep-set eyes, the long nose; the hard mouth, and harder chin and jaw. Even his build and his gait were loud in their assertion of his normal characteristics. The broad, lean shoulders, and generally loose-limbed body was propelled swiftly and alertly at all times.

He had thrust his way in without heralding his coming, and he came swiftly towards his employer's desk. His position as chief engineer and marine architect to the Farlow, Son and Farlow Line at Dorby left him upon an extremely intimate footing with the heads of the firm.

But just now his manner was even more confident than usual. There was a light almost of enthusiasm in his usually cold eyes. He paused at the desk and deposited the rolls of drawings he had in his hands upon the table. Then his eyes turned upon the recumbent Ruxton, and, in a moment, came back almost defiantly to his white-headed chief.

"They're the most exquisitely drawn plans I've ever seen, Sir Andrew," he said, in a peculiarly metallic voice. "If I believed in genius I'd say they are the work of one."

"Sit down, McGrath," said Sir Andrew pleasantly. "We've got to have a talk."

Mr. McGrath promptly deposited himself in the nearest chair, and again his questioning eyes passed from one to the other of his employers.

Sir Andrew drew the plans towards him and idly turned over the sheets and tracings. He was not considering them. He was thinking. Thinking rapidly, as was his habit when engaged upon the work of his enterprise.

"This boat has been built and tested. So has the light. Mr. Ruxton has travelled in a two-thousand-ton boat of this description for nearly a week. He has witnessed the light in operation."

McGrath's eyes were turned half enviously upon Ruxton. There was something bordering upon incredulity in them, too.

"Then they are not some crank's—dreaming?"

"No." Sir Andrew raised his eyes from the drawings, and their unemotional light held the engineer's.

"These plans are for a two-thousand-ton boat. You will put your department on them and increase the tonnage to three thousand, approximately. When you have completed the plans we will lay down the keels of two vessels of that size and proceed with construction with all speed, and—*in absolute secrecy.* So imperative is the latter that no precaution is too great to take. We will go into other matters later on."

Sir Andrew's manner was a dismissal, and the engineer rose to depart. He was accustomed to the ship-owner's brevity, and it suited his own ideas of things. But Ruxton detained him. He, too, had risen from his seat.

"One moment, McGrath," he said quickly. "There is danger—personal danger in this work. It may even be a matter of life and death to—all concerned. We shall probably have no peaceful time over this thing. I expect that every means—even force—will be used to—wreck us. It is only right to tell you. Shall you be—willing to undertake it in the circumstances?"

The engineer regarded him keenly. Then his hard mouth relaxed, and he seemed to lick his lips.

"This danger. Where does it come from?"

"Germany. The German Government."

The Scot's eyes lit. His face contorted, and he gave a short hard laugh.

"I'm more than willing," he said briefly. Then, with a curious unconcern for the warning, he turned to the drawings and gazed down at them affectionately. "Man, but they're beautiful. Did you—get them, Mr. Ruxton?"

There was no mistaking the implication.

"They are not stolen, McGrath," said Ruxton quietly. "At least not in the manner you are thinking. They were given to us by the inventor, whose property they were. But—they represent one of Germany's most treasured secrets."

The Scot nodded.

"Fine," he said, and the ring in his voice left the two men more than satisfied.

Sir Andrew smiled in his most genial fashion.

"Good," he exclaimed. "I shall be free in half an hour, McGrath. We'll go into details then. Thank you."

The engineer departed as hastily as he had appeared, and Ruxton dropped back into his seat. His father was still contemplating the plans.

At last he spoke without looking up.

"We are committed to it," he said. Then: "I wonder."

Ruxton sprang to his feet.

"I am glad—glad."

Then he moved round and stood gazing out through the leaded window, and his thoughts went back to the beautiful creature who on that one memorable night upon his beloved Yorkshire cliffs had first opened the doors of Life to him.

CHAPTER XII

KUHLHAFEN

THE old fortress of Kuhlhafen stands a milestone on the path of Time. Its vast walls have endured and survived the ravages of a thousand storms driving in off the sea. Its gloomy might still rears itself silhouetted against the grey skies of the Baltic upon its lofty setting of wood-clad hills. Its dull, unlit eyes still gaze down upon the broad waters of the shallow, silted harbor from which it takes its name. And with it all it haunts the primitive mind of the simple fisher folk beneath its shadows with the grim romance of the days of martial barbarity which have endured within its walls.

No one would have associated modern significance with this survival of the ages. Yet it was sedulously kept in repair. It still retained its splendid furnishings, and all the relics of its antiquity. Furthermore, all the invention of modern days had been applied to add to its convenience. And it was solicitously cared for by the retainers of the princely house to which it belonged.

The peasants of Kuhlhafen knew every detail of its history. Its martial story was part of their lives. Oh, yes. The information was handed down from father to son, and was told with all that care for fantastic detail in which the primitive mind never fails to indulge itself.

The owner? Of course. It was Prince Frederick von Berger. Did they not have to pay for the tenancy of their miserable hovels to his steward, who lived in the castle itself? Oh, yes. He was a great man—a very great man. This was only one of his estates, and one which he never visited. One could not blame him. It was scarcely attractive to a man who owned a palace in Berlin. Then the storming of the cruel Baltic, which robbed them of comrades every year. Who would live on its bitter, desolate shores unless tied there by the stress of existence? No, he never came, they would tell the enquirer with a shrug. A man who enjoyed the friendly patronage of the supreme War Lord had no call to visit Kuhlhafen, even though the whole of the countryside belonged to him.

This was the spoken attitude of the people towards their over-lord. Maybe, deep in their hearts, other feelings prevailed. But these poor folks had been bred to the discipline of an iron Prussian rule, and it is just possible that they had no power to think or feel otherwise than authority taught them.

But had these simple fisher-folk been less absorbed in the struggle for their frugal existence; had they sufficient initiative to go seek out information for themselves; had they, in fact, been human rather than Prussian peasantry, they might have discovered that their over-lord was a different person from the ease-loving creature of wealth they so fondly supposed.

They would indeed have found that it was by no means his habit to spend idle days in the gilded courts of Berlin. On the contrary, it seemed suspiciously as if it were his lot to have to work very hard indeed. Work which even the cleverest amongst the fishers could never have hoped to achieve.

Frederick von Berger was by no means an ordinary man. Amongst even his intimates he was something of an enigma. These knew that he occupied an exalted position in official life. They knew he was on the best of terms with the Supreme War Lord. This was all patent enough. But the nature of his work was doubtful. His name never appeared in the official lists, although it was understood that he was entitled to the rank of "General" placed before his name. Nor did he attempt to offer the least enlightenment on the subject.

But then he was a silent, even morose, man. He was harsh; a man devoid of any lighter side to his nature. There were even some who looked upon him as a sort of restless evil spirit whom it was very much best to avoid. But, like most men of genuinely strong purpose, public opinion left Frederick von Berger cold. He came and went as it suited him quite regardless of anything but his own objects, and he never failed to avail himself of every ounce of the power which the favor of the German monarch endowed him with.

Kuhlhafen, however, was not kept up in its present condition without having uses in its princely owner's scheme of things. Although the humble fisher-folk remained in ignorance of anything that went on within its austere precincts, it was not so much abandoned by their over-lord as they believed.

Thus it was that, one night, long after the village had been wrapped in slumber, a powerful automobile, with blazing head-lights, flashed through its single main street, and passed on up the heights towards the dour silhouette above. Later, a second automobile passed over the same route. And, with the coming of the second car, there was a tumult of bustle raised amongst the resident staff at the castle.

Later on still, there was even a stranger happening. A single white eye flashed out its searching rays from the sea and settled its focus upon the castle. Then, as though satisfied with its inspection, it turned its gaze upon the surface of the restless waters, and discovered a small motor-driven boat heading towards the fishing-quay of the village. Then, as though in answer to a signal, the blackness of the castle hill was lit by a pair of eyes less dazzling than the eye from the sea, and an automobile made its way towards the quay for which the little sea-boat was heading.

The great secret council-chamber of Kuhlhafen possessed all the air of a dungeon or crypt. It suggested no other for its original purpose. But as long as the present house had ruled within its walls this great underground apartment had been known as the secret council-chamber. It was probably the oldest portion of the whole castle, for it certainly dated back to the days somewhere before the earliest occupation of the territory by the Romans.

One or two significant additions had been made since the great dungeon had been converted to the dignity of a council-chamber. Down the length of the low-roofed hall, between the central aisle of piers supporting it, a long iron-bound oaken table filled up the major space. This was flanked by a number of leather-seated chairs belonging to a similar period, and of equal crudeness of manufacture.

Table and chairs formed the complete furnishing of this dreary apartment, whose only beauty lay in the simple antiquity of its architecture and the characteristic chiselling of the grey piers which supported its quartered roof. For the rest, in the dim recesses beyond the rays of the lamplight on the table, there were to be found the wrought-iron sconces upon the walls, which had once doubtless served to support the light of blazing torches. And further, still more remote from the light, lost in the dusky corners, were an array of instruments which had survived the years, and whose evil purpose there could be no mistaking.

At the head of this long table sat a man with almost snow-white hair and a moustache of similar color, carefully trained with a sharp, upward turning of the pointed ends. His was a handsome face of considerable refinement. But it was deeply lined, even beyond his years, and the thin lips, drooping markedly downwards at the corners of his mouth, gave his whole expression something of tragedy.

On his right, at the side of the table, the single lamplight shining full upon his harsh features, sat Frederick von Berger, the absolute antithesis of the man at the head of the table. Here was cold strength and even ruthlessness, not one whit less than the harsh surroundings of the council-chamber in which he sat. The cold eyes of the man possessed not one single lurking shadow of warmth. He was perhaps forty-five, and the iron mould of his plain features, and the tremendous air of physical strength about his body, all added to the impression that here was the direct descendant, untempered with the blood of gentler races, of those savage forbears who had wrested place and power for themselves from amongst their people by the sheer weight of the sword.

These two men had remained seated in conference for some time. The manner of the man at the head of the table was silent, even morose. Frederick von Berger did most of the talking, and this fact, combined with his marked air of deference, gave some indication that his guest was some one of extremely unusual importance.

After a while Von Berger rose from his seat and was swallowed up in the shadowy remoteness of the room. His companion remained seated, leaning back in his chair, gazing after him with deep, cold, introspective eyes. His preoccupation was marked, and the drawn lines of his handsome face gave some clue to the importance, and even urgency, of his visit to these outlands of northern Prussia.

When Von Berger returned he was accompanied by another, who, as he came within the radiance of the lamp, revealed the angular, erect figure of the Captain-General of the great arsenal of Borga. The moment he came within view of the solitary figure at the head of the table he halted abruptly in perfect military salutation. His whole attitude underwent a marked and deferential change. His usual air of arrogant authority seemed to have dropped from him like a cloak. It was a perfect example of the effect of the Prussian system.

The man at the table nodded faintly. It was the signal Von Berger and his companion awaited. They approached. Von Berger took his original seat, but Von Salzinger remained standing.

Von Berger waited. Then the man at the head of the table bestirred himself.

"Go on," he said sharply. And at once the Prince turned upon the Captain-General.

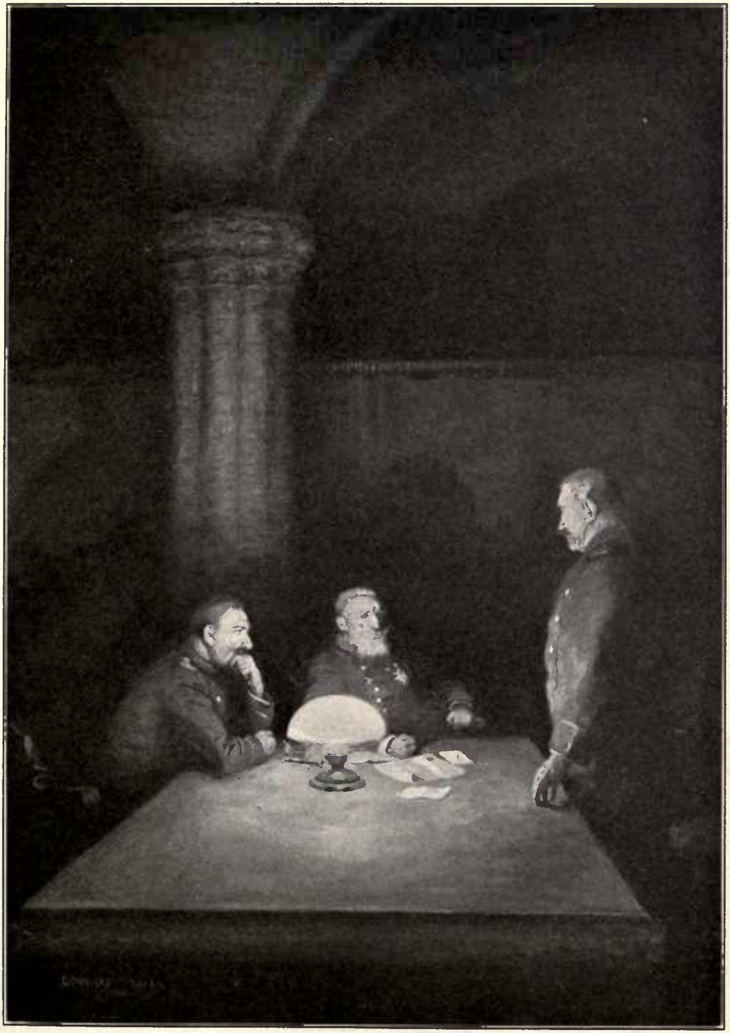
"The complaint is a serious one, Herr Captain-

General. It is so serious, and affects such deep interests, that, as you see, it is deemed inadvisable to place it before a military tribunal. But it is also felt that the complaint in itself is not all; that there is other matter of even greater importance lying behind it. Thus you have been summoned to make your explanations—here."

The cold eyes of the man were turned from Von Salzinger upon a document lying on the table. Just for a moment his hard voice ceased from stirring the echoes of the vaulted chamber. But it was only for a moment. The next he was reading from the paper before him.

"It appears that on Prince von Hertzwohl's last visit to Borga, when he was conveying thither his relative, his most important engineer, for the rectification of certain defects in his new light, you displayed towards him the gratuitous discourtesy of refusing the Prince's guarantee of his relative, and sought to submit the man to the interrogatory customary where there is some doubt of a visitor's credentials. The Prince, somewhat naturally, refused to submit to such an indignity, and left the arsenal. Whereupon you persisted in your attitude, and even went so far as to endanger the Prince's valuable life by opening the secret batteries upon his vessel—a course which was utterly unwarranted in view of the Prince's identity and position. It is necessary that you should now state your story of this affair without any reservations."

Von Berger's charge was coldly formal. It was also distinctly threatening in its final pronouncement. The arrogant Von Salzinger was bitterly forced to the re-



"The Complaint is a Serious One."

flection that he might expect small enough mercy if he failed to convince with his explanation. That which disturbed him more, however, was the identity of at least one of the men to whom he must explain. He had counted on a military tribunal, where his rank and the nature of his office would count. He felt that these things would by no means count here.

But he dared not display any misgiving. He knew the value of promptness and brevity, with, at least, one of his audience. So he replied —

"In every detail the complaint is accurately outlined. But it avoids entirely Prince von Hertzwohl's offence."

"Offence?"

The interrogration came sharply from the man at the head of the table, who was almost lost to Von Salzinger's view behind the bulk of the oil-lamp which lit the scene.

"It was his right, just as it would have been your right, sir," Von Salzinger replied daringly, "to submit to the discipline of the place, a discipline which has been ordered by those who have a right to order such things. The complaint must come after obedience, not after open defiance of Berlin's most imperative orders. That is the case of Prince von Hertzwohl. I could not have acted otherwise than I did in the interests of our greatest of all State secrets."

The man at the head of the table nodded in seeming approval at the robust vindication. Von Berger gave no sign. His eyes never left the angular figure of the Captain-General.

"But you threatened his life—by your action in the matter." Von Berger's words came without emotion. The hard eyes were unchanging.

"I submit that it had been better for the State had I more than threatened it."

"How do you mean, sir?"

The man at the head of the table was sitting up. His eyes were angrily alight.

For a second Von Salzinger flinched before this display. He recovered himself swiftly, however. He knew he dared not lose a second in such a crisis.

"Your pardon, sir, if my manner should seem rough. I feel strongly. If a man in Von Hertzwohl's position refuses to obey the laws he is fully cognizant of, then, I say, he has reason—grave reason for so doing."

"You imply?"

Again it was the question of the man at the head of the table.

"He dared not have his—nephew interrogated, sir."

"And if he dared not?" It was still the same speaker.

Von Salzinger shrugged.

"There can only be one interpretation, sir."

"You mean—betrayal of Borga's secrets."

"Yes, sir."

The man at the head of the table turned to Von Berger with a smile that never reached his eyes.

"Tell him," he said imperiously.

"Your contention loses all its apparent force in the light of—facts," said Von Berger coldly. "Agents have been set to work upon the matter. From the moment of Von Hertzwohl's complaint, in justice to you as Borga's commandant, the closest secret enquiries have been made. On the occasion of Hertzwohl's visit to your command his nephew did accompany him. This nephew is certainly his most trusted engineer, and is the actual inventor of the U-light. There is no shadow of doubt about these matters. Your suspicions are groundless and cannot be accepted in your defence."

Von Salzinger was taken aback at the concise refutation of his carefully elaborated suspicions. He began to see the fabric he had constructed tumbling about his ears. He had been the victim of his own spleen, he knew, and his suspicions had had no sound foundation.

He stood flushed and silent. Then the man at the head of the table unconsciously came to his rescue.

"Show him," he briefly ordered Von Berger.

The latter picked up a photograph—a mere rough print—and handed it to the troubled Von Salzinger.

"That is Herr von Bersac, the Prince's nephew. It was taken three days ago, without the man being aware of it. That is the man who visited Borga with his uncle."

Von Salzinger had taken the picture in his hands, and his eager eyes scrutinized it carefully. A moment later he handed it back, and an intense look of triumph had replaced the embarrassment of a moment before.

"That is not the man to whom Von Hertzwohl displayed the secrets of Borga. It is not the man I sought to have interrogated. The man who posed as Hertzwohl's nephew was a tall man of magnificent physique. Not slim like that youth. He was a man of nearly forty, with fair, curling hair and dark eyes, and the face and general figure of an—Englishman."

"Englishman?"

The man at the head of the table started up. The passionate hatred flung into his echo of the other's word sent a wave of rejoicing through Von Salzinger's heart.

"I am morally certain, sir," he added.

Quite abruptly Von Berger had become completely thrust into the background. The other had taken entire possession of the scene. He began to pace the stone-flagged hall with hasty, uneven steps.

"If I thought it could be so," he cried, with a sudden wave of intemperate heat. "Oh, if I believed it were!" He raised one clenched fist above his head and shook it in dire threat. The other arm remained unmoved at his side. The passionate eyes were flashing a cruel, almost insane fire as he strode the echoing stones. The others were held in appalled silence in face of his paroxysm.

In a moment he turned fiercely upon the Captain-General, standing beyond the table. There was no longer any dignity or restraint in him. The hectoring nature of the man was caught in the passion of the moment, and his innate brutality must find an object upon which to vent itself.

"I tell you, if the secrets of Borga have been betrayed there shall be such a reckoning as shall stagger our country from end to end. From the highest to the lowest those responsible shall pay to the uttermost. Of all the world—an Englishman! Gott in Himmel, it is unthinkable!"

He glared for a silent moment into the abashed face of Von Salzinger. Then he went on more calmly—

"I tell you you are wrong. Damnably wrong—somehow. Hertzwohl dare not betray us. No money in the world would buy him. We have proved him a hundred times. English gold to buy Hertzwohl?" He laughed derisively, but there was no conviction in his manner. "You understand, sir, you are wrong—utterly wrong. The matter shall be cleared up. You shall confront

Von Hertzwohl. And if lies have been told, God help the liars."

The two men stood eye to eye across the table. Von Salzinger had recovered under stress of emergency.

"I could ask no better, sir—if it were in the best interests of the secrets of Borga. But is it? I could give you the names of a number of my junior officers in Borga, all of whom encountered this—nephew of Hertzwohl. And without reference to me, there is not one of them but would deny the identity of that nephew they saw in Borga with the identity of the original of that picture. If the liar is to be punished I have no fear, sir. But would it be in the best interests of Borga to deal hastily with the matter?"

"Explain!" The man went back to his seat at the head of the table. His harsh demand warned his hearers of the storm still raging within him.

But Von Berger took up the reply.

"I see the Captain-General's point, sir," he said. "If Hertzwohl is confronted it means his vindication or immediate punishment. If secrets have been betrayed such a course will not serve us. This Englishman Von Salzinger speaks of will still possess them, and—be *free to act upon them.* We must recover those secrets, or *make them useless to their possessors.* Then we can deal with those responsible for Borga."

Von Salzinger listened to the cold words and eagerly awaited the reply of the man at the head of the table. But none was forthcoming, for he seemed to be lost in moody contemplation of the whole affair. Therefore the Captain-General seized his opportunity.

"That is how I see it, sir," he said eagerly. "I submit, with all deference, that I be nominally punished as though I had seriously offended. What is that punishment? Degradation? Degradation and retirement from the service of the Fatherland. It will satisfy Hertzwohl, and put him off his guard. He will have no suspicion, and I shall be free to work. If I am placed on the Secret Service and sent to—England, it should not be impossible to discover all we want to know and nullify the effects of the treachery. Those concerned can be silenced. We can be guided by developments. And ——"

"The harm is done, man! You talk of nullifying. You talk like a fool. There can be no undoing the harm done."

The hoarse passion of the man at the table was in every word he spoke. The gleaming eyes were full of the burning fire of unrestrained ferocity.

But the cold tones of Von Berger once more dropped like ice upon a kindling fire.

"It will be the better course, sir," he said. "We do not yet know the full position. That must be perfectly established before we can estimate the damage."

But the other seemed absorbed in his own imagery of the matter.

"An Englishman! Gott!"

Von Berger turned abruptly to Von Salzinger.

"Leave us. I will call you when ready. Remain within call."

The authority was unmistakable. The Captain-General might have been the veriest conscript for the courtesy displayed. He left the great chamber with no outward sign, but with storm sweeping through his heart.

Beyond the door he reviewed the situation. His position was by no means enviable, but it was not without possibilities. He realized now that the hand of Fate had pointed through the whole affair. He knew that he had had no suspicion of Hertzwohl in Borga. A thought of treachery had never entered his head. Hertzwohl had piqued him. He had seriously offended him, as, long ago, this same man's daughter had offended his pride. He had intended merely to retaliate through his official capacity, and now through these trivial pettinesses a deadly plot had been revealed. He had answered the summons to Kuhlhafen intending to defend himself by casting suspicion upon Hertzwohl, and his defence had turned out to be the true estimate of the matter. Well ——

But his reflections were cut short by the summons to return to the council-chamber. Von Berger held the iron-studded door for him to enter, and, as he passed within, he closed and carefully secured it.

Then he came back to his place at the table, and his companion signed for him to proceed.

He faced the waiting officer.

"Captain-General von Salzinger, you are to be degraded from your rank and office. You will be relieved of command at Borga at once. You will then report to the Foreign Office, where you will receive sealed instructions. On receipt of these instructions you will proceed to London without delay. When you have completed the work allotted to you in England—satisfactorily—you will receive your reinstatement. That is all."

CHAPTER XIII

NEWS

THE atmosphere of the little study, or library, or whatever it was called, in which Ruxton carried on the private work of his political calling, in the diminutive house in Smith Square, Westminster, was redolent with that delightful suggestion of the old world so dear to the collector's heart.

Its owner was a collector by instinct and training. He had been brought up to the study of old-world art, and had learned to appreciate the beauties of all those delicate and priceless specimens which are the handicraft of bygone genius. But he was no keeper of a museum. His little home in the purlieus of Westminster was a storehouse of beauty and charm. Every piece of furniture, every tapestry, every rug, every metal gem was full of significance and harmony with its setting. Not one detail of this home but had cost him hours of thought and consideration, and the result was all he asked, a perfectly harmonious whole, a creation of all that made for undemonstrative artistry in his nature.

Just now even the dying early autumn sun seemed graciously disposed towards it. It was peeping in through the old Georgian windows and searching out the mellow beauties of the study. Its softened tone seemed to somehow belong to the picture it discovered within. The delicate tracery of the deep, ruddy mahogany furnishings, the design of which must have given hours of delight to the artist soul of Chippendale; the softened tints of the ancient Persian rugs upon the crazily uneven flooring; the exquisite carving of the oaken panels and the delicate pictures of the hanging tapestries above them,—all these beauties seemed to belong to a time of softened light which comes with the ageing of the year.

The calm delight of it all resisted even the touch of a modern figure suddenly appearing in its midst. Ruxton's modern blue serge suit and soft felt hat might have been an anachronism, but it gave no serious offence. He entered the room and glanced swiftly and appreciatively upon his treasured friends. Then he laid his hat aside, took his seat at his desk and prepared to attend to some work he had on hand.

But, for once, inclination proved stronger than purpose. He sat back in the ample chair, such as an elderly ancestor might have revelled in, lit a cigar, and, for some idle minutes, all effort was abandoned in favor of the relaxed dreaming of a brain accustomed to high pressure.

It was the late afternoon of a long day spent in endless interviews in the world of the officialdom to which he belonged here in London. But his interviews had had little enough to do with the more commonplace affairs of State. His portfolio in the Cabinet, which left him responsible for the affairs of the Duchy of Lancaster, also left him with ample time to carry out those other plans which he believed were to have so great a significance in his country's future.

His day had been spent in completing the negotiations whereby, for a considerable period, certain portions of the great ship-building yards at Dorby were to be adopted and controlled by the Admiralty. It had not been easy to stir the machinery of departments, and only had it been made possible by invoking the efforts of the Prime Minister, Sir Meeston Harborough, and the Foreign Secretary, the Marquis of Lordburgh, with both of whom he had already established a confidential understanding. Admiral Sir Joseph Caistor was purely a naval man, a brilliant officer, but as yet intolerant of desecrating the traditions of his department by confusing it with civilian controlled establishments.

However, the last obstacle had been finally surmounted, and, with its passing, he discovered the real depths of his anxiety. A strong conviction of impending action by the German Government had taken hold of him without his being fully aware of it. He had been oppressed by it. And now, at last, he experienced a deep sense of relief that the cloak of naval secrecy and protection was to be spread out over the new construction upon which he and his father had embarked.

He sat thus reviewing these things and smoking leisurely, in the manner of a satisfied man. He knew he ought to attend to his letters and then go on down to the House, which was now sitting. But he had no intention of doing so. There was no debate of importance going on, and he had no desire to listen to the silly twaddle of a number of men whose qualifications as legislators would have been insufficient to achieve for them squatting room on a council of Red Indians, and whose minds had no other conception of greatness than the limelight of a halfpenny press.

It was five weeks since his return from Borga. Five weeks of hard, rushing work in which a confusion of affairs required to be sorted and carried through; in which plans had to be developed and set in train, and during which a growing and almost oppressing sense of responsibility had steadily taken possession of him. There had been no leisure. It had been work incessant, work, and again work. Now, at last, he felt that a breathing space was almost permissible.

In his first moment of leisure he was determined to carry out a purpose upon which he had resolved, even amidst the turmoil of the affairs he had been engaged upon. For not once during all those weeks had the haunting memory of his beautiful visitor on the Yorkshire cliffs been lost to him. He had heard no word from her, he had caught no glimpse of her since he had watched her finally ascend the companionway of the submersible to return to the shore. For the first time in his life he had been made aware that there could be a more imperative claim upon a man than his simple duty. For the first time in his life he found himself hearkening to the mandates of Nature in a yielding spirit. He could no longer resist the haunting charms of the wonderful creature who had so appealed to his manhood.

He sat revolving his purpose in his mind. And, so doing, he idly drew a copy of an evening paper towards him. He turned its pages in abstracted contemplation. Then, suddenly, a head-line caught and held his attention. It was the announcement of the completion of his negotiations with the naval department.

He read it eagerly, not with any desire to discover publicity for himself—rather the reverse. He looked to discover how far the pernicious habit of publicity might be damaging to the cause in which he was working. He sighed in relief as he came to the end of the paragraph. For once the press had exercised laudable restraint. There was nothing in it calculated to inspire curiosity or even comment. It simply stated that a department in the Dorby yards had been taken over by the Board of Admiralty to relieve the congestion in the Naval Construction yards.

He thrust the paper aside, drew a telegram pad towards him, and indited an address upon it.

"VEEVEE, LONDON."

Then he paused and looked up as the door in the panelling of the room was thrust open and his secretary presented himself.

"It's the telephone, and a woman's voice speaking, Mr. Farlow," he said, with a whimsical smile. "I endeavored to get her name, but she refused it. I warned her that I could not call you without she stated her business, or gave her name. Finally she said I had better tell you that 'Veevee, London,' wished to speak to you urgently. I wrote the name down so there should be no ——"

"You can put me through—at once."

The crisp response was not without significance to the younger man, and Harold Heathcote departed with the mental reservation that "even with Cabinet Ministers you never can tell."

A few moments later the telephone receiver on Ruxton Farlow's table purred its soft challenge, and he picked it up in hasty and delighted anticipation. In a moment he recognized Vita Vladimir's voice. His dark eyes smiled at the sunlit window as he replied to her enquiry.

"Yes. It's Ruxton Farlow speaking. How-do-you-do? Most extraordinary coincidence. I was just writing out a telegram to you. I was wond—— Yes, it's ages. I've a lot to tell you about—things. Eh? You must see me to-night. Why, that's delightful. I am in great good luck. Not sure about the luck?" He laughed confidently. "I am. Eh?" His laugh had died out abruptly. "Bad news. That's—— Well, where shall I see you? Not at—all right. Could you manage dinner with me somewhere? Ah, anywhere you choose. What's that? The Oberon? The West Room? Will that be all right in view of the—bad news? Yes, I agree. It is sufficiently secluded. Shall we say at eight o'clock? You're sure it quite suits you? Splendid. Yes. Then good-bye—till eight o'clock."

Ruxton replaced the receiver, and, for a moment, sat staring out at the sunlit square. His eyes were half smiling still, but there was a puzzled, slight elevation of his level brows. He was thinking, speculating as to the nature of the bad news. But even bad news which again brought him into contact with the Princess Vita was robbed of more than half its significance.

Whatever Ruxton Farlow's impressions, drawn from his earlier encounters with Vita von Hertzwohl, they became totally eclipsed by the delight in her perfect beauty as it appeared to him when he kept his appointment for dinner that night.

Her tall figure, so beautifully rounded, so perfect in its delicate proportions, and so full of a delicious sinuous grace, was gowned to perfection. Her wonderful red-gold hair, tinged with its soft sheen of burnished copper, was a perfect setting for the delicate tracery of jewels which completed its exquisitely unconventional dressing. Her wonderful grey eyes shone eagerly up into his, lighting the essentially foreign complexion which was hers with a warm fire of virile mentality. Such were the feelings she inspired that he wondered absurdly that he could ever have taken her for anything less than the princess he now knew her to be. So great was her effect upon him that it was not until her own low-spoken words, reminding him of the bad news of which she was the bearer, permitted the memory of the affairs he was engaged upon to return to their paramount place in his consideration.

They were seated at a small round table in a remote corner of the great West Room. The table next to them was unoccupied, but, for the rest, the room was fairly full, and amongst the diners were a considerable number of notables who preferred the quiet harmonious charm of tasteful surroundings and excellent cooking to the blatancy of the more advertised caravansaries.

It was not until the *pêches-melba* had been served, and the order for coffee had been given to the waiter, that the cloud was allowed to descend upon Ruxton's perfect enjoyment. They had talked of all he had seen upon his visit to Borga. They had talked of Vita's father, and the services he yearned to perform for humanity. Ruxton had described in detail their flight from the great arsenal and its Prussian commandant. And all the time Vita had withheld her news, fearing for herself, as much as for her companion, the complete banishment of the delight of this moment of their meeting again.

But it had to come, and she faced it resolutely. There had fallen a pause in their talk, and she drew a deep sigh.

"And now—now for the purpose of this meeting," she said.

Then with a resolute air she rested her elbows upon the table and clasped her beautiful shapely hands.

"Is there any other purpose than—the present?" enquired Ruxton, following her example and leaning forward. His smile was one of whimsical protest. He knew that the moment had come when he must once more return to the harness of his office. "I feel rather like a navvy," he proceeded. "After tremendous exertions I have just been lounging away my dinner hour. The whistle has blown, and I must get to work again. You have blown the whistle."

Vita smiled faintly. But her eyes lost none of their seriousness thereby.

"I'm afraid there are liable to be some heavy penalties if—you do not respond to it promptly. Oh, dear, I have so enjoyed myself. I wish there were no Prussians in the world."

"There are fewer than there were."

"Yes, but so long as one remains there are—too many. I have had a communication from my father. It came to-day."

"A letter?"

Vita shook her head.

"We do not communicate by letter. A messenger. A funny little old man who carries samples of buttons made in Austria. He represents a button firm, and sells millions of them over here. He happens to be my father's brother, although no one is allowed to guess the relationship. He is my father's most loyal—friend."

"And he has brought you word of——"

"Von Salzinger."

Ruxton waited for her to continue. He was watching her with eyes that left him utterly incapable of forgetting her wonderful attraction. She was no longer merely a partner in the work he had marked out for himself. She was more. She was the woman of his early youthful dreams come to life, and every word that fell from her lips had for him a significance which appealed to the big soul within him apart from any verbal meaning it might convey.

"You know father is the oddest mixture of simplicity and shrewdness I have ever known. He is utterly without fear, and his trust, to a point, is childlike. But when he is threatened with serious danger he is possessed of all the subtlety, it seems to me, of the whole world. That is perhaps why I do not gravely fear for his personal safety. His message to me illustrates his simplicity, but gives no inkling of that wonderful shrewdness which I know him to possess. Perhaps it is worded purposely so that I should miss its real significance. You see, father knows I am a coward, and does not like to distress me. Perhaps, on the other hand, he only sees in the development the dire result of his protest to Berlin. You see I have had the story of your visit to Borga from him weeks ago. But I see more in it, and I am right. That's why I warned you of 'bad news.'"

"And the news?" Ruxton's imagination had been stirred by the girl's preliminary.

"In brief it is that Captain-General von Salzinger has been relieved of his command at Borga, as a result of his attitude towards you and my father."

"That is what your father assured me would happen. He assured me that in Berlin his power was almost unlimited—as regards Borga. I see little to trouble us in that."

"No-o."

Vita's whole attitude underwent a change. She became reflective, and her warm grey eyes grew cold with the bitterness of memory. After some silent moments she seemed to arrive at a decision.

"To impress you with my point of view I—must make something like a confession," she went on presently.

She was interrupted by the returning waiter, who removed the sweet plates and cleared the table for the coffee. After he had poured it out and departed, Vita went on. All doubt had gone from her manner, and her eyes smiled back into the eager face of the man who had made for himself the discovery of the woman in Eden.

"It is just a little bit difficult to tell you these things," she smiled. "But I must do so, or you will not see the danger as I see it. It is about an early love affair of mine with—Von Salzinger. Oh, don't make any mistake," she cried hastily, at the abrupt, ingenuous change in the man's expression. "I was never in love with him. But he was with me. Ugh! Von Salzinger. A Prussian from head to foot. A typical, soulless Prussian. No, no. This man is ambitious. That is all he cares for in life—himself and his ambition. My father was a great man in the country, and would have been an excellent lever to further his ends. So he strove to—enlist my sympathies. I was very young, and—well, I think most women, even at an early age, like being made love to. I did not so greatly discourage him at first. Then came the War, and I discovered many things about the German people I had never dreamed of. I also discovered the Prussian in Von Salzinger. He strove his utmost to enlist me in the Secret Service, of which, to my horror, I discovered he was a prominent member. Need I tell you what happened? There was a scene—a dreadful scene, which he has probably never forgiven, and—may never forgive. Now here is the complication of which my father is unaware. It is my father who has brought about his downfall. Do you see? He undoubtedly has suspicions of you. Consequently he has suspicions of my father. He is bred to the Secret Service. Where has he gone, and what will he do? What has he told Berlin, and—what understanding has he come to with them? My simple father believes he has settled the matter definitely in the only way his position entitled him to settle it. I think he has set an unusually swift and poisonous snake upon the tracks of all of us. Now you tell me what you think. You can probably judge the position better than I. You can look upon it from a detached point of view."

"Detached?" Ruxton smiled dubiously. But his interrogation seemed to pass Vita by. She sipped her coffee and waited. Her grey eyes were completely veiled beneath her long, dense lashes. Ruxton pushed his empty cup aside. "The danger I see is for your father. Not for you, or for anything over here. That, of course, may come later. The immediate danger is for your father."

Vita sighed.

"You have lightened my fears." She raised her shining eyes. "That sounds terrible, doesn't it? But—I would rather have danger threaten him, personally, than threaten his project—our project. His position is unique, and I doubt even if you can appreciate it. And then he has a means of protecting himself which even Berlin has no understanding of. Father can escape at any moment he considers it necessary. That was all thought out, with many other things, before we approached you. *Our visit to Dorby is still all unsuspected.* Remember that."

"Yes."

"But, in spite of your view-point, we shall hear from Von Salzinger, if I am not very much mistaken. You see, he knows I am in London. Unless we hear soon that he has been given another appointment in Germany, then I feel certain we shall have him swiftly on our tracks. What can he do—to hurt us?"

There was unmistakable apprehension in the girl's eyes. There was a gravity in her assertion that would not be denied, and even Ruxton realized the soundness of her argument. But he sought to console her, to lessen her fears. He desired more than all things to see her warm smile replace the apprehension she was now displaying.

"He can do nothing here, should he favor us with a visit," he said lightly. "I have taken no chances. Only to-day I have completed negotiations by which our new constructions are definitely placed under the control and protection of our Admiralty. If your father is safe, then I think we can snap our fingers at Captain-General von Salzinger."

"I'm—glad," cried Vita. Then impulsively: "So glad. Perhaps you don't quite understand *our* feelings. You see," she went on warmly, "our project has been placed before everything else in life. Life and death or imprisonment are secondary—quite secondary—with us. It is this effort to save humanity from the disaster which is being engineered in the Teutonic mind that is all that we care for. If necessary we shall not shrink from yielding up our lives to that cause. I wonder. Can you understand? Yes." She nodded decidedly. "You do understand. That is why we came to you. Now you have reassured me. Germany cannot stop the work going forward. It has become a British national effort." She sighed again, however. "But for all that my news is bad. I am sure of it. Perhaps it is only relatively so. I cannot say. If the work goes on no news can be really bad. Yes, I am relieved, and I am glad I 'phoned you. I wish my father had been here to hear you say that the work would go on. It would have been the greatest moment of his life."

There was a great striving for reassurance in her manner. Ruxton watched it, as he watched every other play of light and shade in her voice and expression. Nor was it until he witnessed the return of her brilliant smile that he felt content. With its advent he returned again to the serene enjoyment of the moment.

At length, no further excuse for remaining would serve, and at half-past nine they rose to go. For Ruxton it was the passing of an important milestone on his journey through life. There remained no longer any doubt of his feelings. He knew he had met at last the only woman in the world who could reveal to him the true depths of happiness in life. His full realization had come with her frank avowal of the place Von Salzinger had striven to hold in her life. It had been a threatening cloud, a summer billow of cloud tossed up by some adverse air-current, and, for the moment, it had obscured his sun. Its passing had left him in the full blaze of a radiance which he now appreciated at its true worth. He knew that he loved this wonderful Princess Vita.

Once again the hand of Destiny had been revealed. He was moving blindly at its bidding. Nor had he will or inclination to diverge from the course marked out. He was content—more than content, and his only alloy was the rapidly approaching termination of the all too short evening.

His car rolled up to the door. He had handed Vita into it, and stood leaning in through the doorway.

"Where shall he drive to?" he enquired, with a smile of amusement. "Kensington?"

"Please, Kensington."

There was almost a challenge in the smile with which Vita replied to him.

A moment later he was sitting beside her in the cabriolet as they drove on towards the crossing of Piccadilly Circus.

"It is too late to let you take me all the way to my home," Vita said quietly. "Besides, I would rather remain in town for the night." Then she broke off in an undecided fashion.

Ruxton caught at the pause.

"Do not think about it. I have no desire to know anything but that which you choose to tell me."

Vita laughed. And Ruxton felt that her laugh was slightly embarrassed.

"It seems strange not to tell you where my real home is," she said. "There is no adequate reason for not doing so—and yet—I will tell you the reason that I occupy my Kensington flat in my two Christian names, and keep my real home away in the country. Father and I thought it out when we embarked upon our plans. We decided that in emergency it would be necessary to have a secure retreat. We endeavored to forestall all possibilities. We ——"

She broke off, gazing across the car at the open window of the door beside Ruxton. Her eyes were full of alarm. The car had stopped in a stream of traffic, held up by the imperious arm of the point policeman. A taxicab had come to a stop beside them, and slightly in advance. A hatless head had been thrust out of the window to observe the cause of the delay. It was a square head upon still squarer shoulders. The neck that linked them was fleshy and powerful. The hair was short and stubbly.

Vita's hand reached swiftly and caught Ruxton's arm.

"Quick," she whispered. "Quick—but cautiously. Don't let him see you. There, leaning out of that cab. It is Von Salzinger."

Ruxton, his pulses quickened at the touch of Vita's hand upon his arm and the eager alarm of her whisper, leant forward and cautiously peered out of the window. Instantly the inevitable happened. The car moved forward and closed up on the cab. They had drawn abreast. The movement distracted the occupant of the cab. His head turned and Ruxton found himself gazing squarely into the fleshy features of the Commandant of Borga. He promptly drew back, but it was too late. Von Salzinger had no scruples. He had obviously recognized the

Englishman, for now he leant farther out of the window and deliberately peered into the well-lit interior of the car for a second look at its occupants.

It was a desperate, trying movement. Ruxton was helpless. There was nothing to be done. The man's scrutiny of both himself and his companion remained until the traffic moved on. Then, and then only, did he withdraw his head.

"He has lost no time, and has had all the—luck," said Vita in a hard, bitter tone.

But Ruxton smiled and spoke down into the tube to the chauffeur.

"There is a taxi beside us. Avoid it." Then he put up the tube and turned to the girl at his side. "Your fears were well grounded. With Von Salzinger in London there can be only one possible interpretation of the fact. But I don't think he has had all the luck. You forget that I have completed my arrangements with the Admiralty."

CHAPTER XIV

" KAMERADS "

TWO men walked briskly up Baker Street in the direction of the Underground Station. At least, one of them walked briskly. The gait of the other were better described as hurried. He was obviously making an effort to keep up with his powerful, square-cut, vigorous companion Many eyes were turned upon them as they passed by. It was the provocative air of the larger man, whose gait was more than arrogant.

The lesser of the two was not oblivious to the attention.

" It is almost in the nature of a shock to find myself walking beside you in London, Ludwig. It is the old days again. But in the old days you were thankful to disguise the fact that you possessed military training. Now it is as if you were on parade. These people hate and distrust anything which suggests the—military."

Ludwig von Salzinger laughed gutturally. His fierce eyes glanced swiftly about him, ready to challenge any resentful glance in his direction.

" I care nothing for the pigs," he observed pleasantly.

" No. But you are here for—distraction. I have work which demands that I attract as little attention as possible."

" Distraction ? " Von Salzinger laughed without any mirth. Then he became suddenly serious. " Distraction —yes, that is it."

The smaller man was quick of eye—almost furtive. His slight figure was well clad in an ordinary blue serge suit. His boots had once been of patent leather. His hat was of the Homburg pattern so beloved of the Londoner. He wore his brown hair fairly long to disguise the flat back of his head. His face was perfectly clean shaven, which left it typical of the ordinary man on the street. The other was so obviously of the Teuton military caste in spite of his elegant civilian dress, that his companion was seriously troubled. He protested again.

" If you cannot disguise yourself let us take a cab. Can you not drop your shoulders like the London ' knut ' ? Can you not slouch ? Can you not refrain from lifting your feet as though you would crush a worm, or—an Englishman ? Your moustache is bad enough."

" Ach ! you are afraid, like some sick woman. What is it ?" cried Salzinger half angrily, half contemptuously. " Has the work broken your spirit ? It was not so in the old days. Johann Stryj, you need a holiday—distraction, like I am seeking." He laughed at his own clumsy humor.

Stryj took no umbrage. He never took umbrage till he had discovered all the possibilities of a man. Von Salzinger had arrived just as he had finished his English breakfast in his essentially English flat in Baker Street. Johann Stryj had spared no pains to mould his whole life and person upon London lines. Von Salzinger had explained nothing as yet of the meaning of his sudden descent upon London. He had merely demanded that his erstwhile comrade now accompany him to his hotel.

" And what—distraction do you seek ? "

The man's quick eyes were sharply questioning in spite of the smile accompanying his words.

"That is what I conduct you to my hotel to tell you of."

Johann Stryj appeared to acquiesce, and they progressed in silence for a few paces. Then the quick eyes were again raised in the direction of Von Salzinger's square face.

"You have left us all very far behind in the service of the Fatherland. We hear it all—here. And four years ago you were with us, waiting upon every message that came, wondering where the next few hours would find us."

Stryj's words were calculated to set the other talking. They succeeded. Von Salzinger was obviously pleased.

"You, my Johann, were built for the—service. I was not. I have not that faculty for making my feelings subservient to the needs of the moment. I was glad when the call of the war took me out of it, and—gave me my chance."

Stryj nodded in an expressionless fashion.

"Yes. I am at home in the work. I love it." Then he laughed silently. "I am the servant of every pompous official who visits London. I am the slave of my orders. I am a cypher on the official lists, I am nothing amongst the people of the nation which I serve. Yet I am the head of the underground system which works here in England, and, incidentally, my income is four times that of a Captain-General. Your honor is very great, Ludwig, but I wonder if you have advanced since—those days."

Von Salzinger made no reply. He was thinking of the recent scene in which he had participated in the castle of Kuhlhafen. His face expressed something of his feelings of chagrin, and his companion was not slow to detect them.

"This is a thought of yours too, perhaps," he went on at once. "The moment a man enters the higher ranks of our army his troubles begin. He must fight for favor, and win it or decay in some obscure ditch in the military office. Nor can he rely for five minutes upon that favor. Degradation awaits at the first blunder which it is not humanly possible to avoid. Is it not so?"

All the buoyancy of Von Salzinger seemed to have vanished from his hard eyes. His old friend was telling him all that he had only too much reason to be aware of. He had fought his way up that perilous ladder of Prussian militarism, and like so many others he had tripped and fallen, and now was faced with the task of making good the temporary set-back. He had struggled hard at the first trip, and he told himself that fortune had favored him, and he had kept his hold, but well he knew that unless he recovered his foothold himself he must fall to the bottom and die in obscurity.

He turned on the Secret Service man.

"It is all as you say. But the very uncertainty of it makes it all the more worth winning. That is why I am in London now. When I have finished in London I shall have achieved the lasting honor, so rare in our Fatherland."

Stryj shook his head.

"There is none—no lasting honor in our Fatherland," he said.

Then with a quick turn he pointed at the window of a fashionable photographic studio. There was a life-size portrait standing in the very centre of it. It was a full-length portrait of a man of over six feet. He was in the uniform of a British field-marshal.

"There is lasting honor in this country," he said, as they paused and stood gazing at the wonderful face in the portrait, with its level, stern brows, its convincing, powerful eyes, and the heavy moustache that in no way detracted from the purposeful set of the jaws. "They are loyal to those they honor here. The man who has fought a great war for them, as that man has done, need do no more. His name and fame will go down to history with the vast material honor they have showered upon him. That is a name that will never die—in England."

But Von Salzinger had no comment to offer. They stood gazing for some moments at the stern-faced presentation of the marshal. Then quite suddenly an iron grip took hold of the spy's muscular upper arm.

Von Salzinger was pointing at a lesser portrait. It was one among several comprising the faces of well-known parliamentarians.

"That man! Quick!" There was excitement in his voice, and a mild pink had leapt up into his sallow cheeks.

Stryj was startled, but displayed no emotion.

"The name is underneath," he said, pointing. "He is a new member of the Cabinet. Ruxton Farlow."

"Donner! I've found him. Quick! We take a taxi." Then Von Salzinger laughed, all his earlier buoyancy returned. "You are right, my Johann. I am too military to walk in London. But the walk has done me good—much good."

A moment later they were in a taxi speeding on their way towards Von Salzinger's hotel.

"What is the—distraction?" enquired Stryj, as the cab swung sharply out of Baker Street. His calmness of manner was in marked contrast to that of his companion, who was still breathing heavily under his emotion. He understood now that a matter, an important mission, was on hand, and every faculty was alert to miss nothing of any detail of it, even the mood of his old friend.

"Distraction?" Von Salzinger laughed. "Yes, it is distraction. But distraction can mean another emotion than pleasure. Hey?"

"Yes." Stryj nodded.

Then Von Salzinger leant over and whispered elaborately into the other's ear, as the cabby changed his gears with a clatter and the cab began the ascent of the approach to the hotel.

"That man Farlow, as you call him, stole into Borga when I was in command. I am not in command of Borga—now."

Johann Stryj faced his companion with eyes that never seemed to express more than a mild interest. Von Salzinger was lounging in a large armchair smoking a long cigar. They were in the latter's private sitting-room in the hotel. In spite of his leisured attitude, deep emotion lit the eyes of the late Commandant of Borga, and an undercurrent of excitement kept his cigar glowing in a reckless manner. Stryj smoked a Turkish cigarette with a composure that was in sharp contrast with his companion's attitude.

"So you see it was not only friendship that fetched me to your apartment this morning, my good Johann," Von Salzinger finished up, at the conclusion of his story of the visit of Ruxton Farlow to the secret heart of the great

Borga arsenal. "I am here for distraction. Hey? Distraction, and the unravelling of the plot against the most treasured secret of the Fatherland. I am here for more. I am here to break it up, and, incidentally, if possible, to break up those concerned in it."

The man illustrated his purpose viciously, with two clenched fists breaking an imaginary object.

Stryj inhaled deeply of his cigarette.

"And if you fail?"

He was reading deeply into the less astute mind of the other. He had grasped fully his position. He knew, although he asked, what awaited failure for his old comrade, Von Salzinger.

"There will be no failure, I promise you. I have unlimited powers, and I shall use them. Oh, yes, I shall use them."

"What powers?"

The keen eyes of the spy were watchful.

Von Salzinger produced a document from his breast pocket. He opened it. He glanced over it, and passed it across to the other.

"My credentials," he said, with triumph in his accompanying glance.

Johann Stryj took the document and perused it carefully. He closely examined the signatures. When he looked up it was obvious that he was almost startled.

"It has never been done before," he said, almost incredulously. "By this the entire Secret Service is placed at your disposal—absolutely."

Von Salzinger nodded.

"Now do you understand? Now?" he cried violently. "We believe this Englishman has burrowed out the most stupendous secret of our Government. We believe he has tricked us through this traitor, Hertzwohl. Gott! He has caused me to be—degraded."

Stryj passed the violence of his companion by. His mind was searching, searching where the less acute soldier could not follow.

"And what of this Hertzwohl? Has he been shot?"

"Not yet. We have to prove this thing—first. That is *our* work."

"Ah."

Stryj had learned all he wanted to know.

At that moment a waiter entered the room bearing a copy of *Who's Who* for the current year. Von Salzinger seized upon it, and, by the time the man had withdrawn and shut the door, he had found the page he sought.

"Ach!" cried Von Salzinger. "Here he is. The luck has served me well. It is as though the plums were ripe, and ready to drop into my mouth."

Stryj rose and crossed over to his side. He looked down where the stubby finger of the soldier pointed.

"Farlow, Ruxton. Only son of Sir Andrew Farlow, Bart. Member of Parliament for ———. Under Secretary for Foreign Office in 19—. Yes. Partner in firm of Farlow, Son and Farlow, ship-builders and ship-owners. Dorby. Ha! Dorby, Yorkshire. Residence, Dorby Towers, Yorkshire. So." Salzinger looked up as he concluded reading out disjointed fragments of the information he sought. "They are ripe—ripe, these plums," he cried exultingly. "Johann, my friend," he went on, glancing up into the spy's clever face, "it is good to see the plums hanging—ripe. We have got to hear all they talk of and contemplate, we have to watch and discover all that is known by Farlow, Son and Farlow. That is your work. You, and those under your control. You will leave for Dorby at once. While I ——"

"Watch that the birds do not eat the ripe plums you would pick. Dorby. I saw the name in the papers yesterday. Those are the yards some portion of which have been taken over by the British Admiralty. These papers tell me something worth while sometimes."

"The British Navy?" The fierce eyes of the soldier were startled. He ran his fingers through his stubbly hair. "Curse the British Navy."

"Yes."

The mild rejoinder seemed to irritate Von Salzinger.

"Talk! Talk! Ach! Those are your orders, Johann. See to them, and communicate with me here. I must write."

He moved over to a desk while Stryj deliberately adjusted his hat and lit another cigarette. Then he moved towards the door.

"Is there anything else?" he enquired, with his hand upon the handle.

Von Salzinger glanced round.

"Yes, use every means at your command to get the information we need. Remember, Stryj, if the secrets of Borga have been discovered, if our country has been betrayed, then a harvest of vengeance is going to be reaped."

He turned back to his desk and began a long communication addressed to Prince von Berger, while Johann Stryj passed silently out of the room.

CHAPTER XV

THE INERADICABLE STRAIN

VON SALZINGER was gross. He looked it. But he had not yet arrived at those years when the outward form loses its atmosphere of virile strength submerged beneath overwhelming adipose and a general bodily inertia. That would come as inevitably as reaction invariably follows upon the heels of excess when vitality passes its maximum. Von Salzinger was of original type, and beneath the shallow veneer of the civilizing process, in him was to be found of a certainty the hairy hands of the savage. It is the brand which can never be eradicated from the original Teuton, and particularly from those who are native of Prussia. The anxious insistence of the claims to Kultur, emanating more particularly from Prussian sources, can be taken as something in the nature of an unconscious admission of the depths from which they have only been partially lifted.

Von Salzinger was pronouncedly of this type. He possessed all the physical and mental force which belongs to it; just as he possessed the full appetite for excess which is its invariable accompaniment. In him was developed to an unusual degree the desire for all the bodily enjoyment that life can offer to a creature in whose veins flows the full tide of the animal.

Once having completed his arrangements with his erstwhile comrade Johann Stryj, he returned to the carefully considered course which he had marked out. With all the Prussian's scheming mind, from the moment he had been made aware of the drift of his fortunes he had cast about for the best outlets which might promise amelioration for the position which chance had placed him in. Nor had he been slow to discover what he sought. Possibilities had promptly opened up before the mental force which he applied to the problem before him.

He withdrew a letter-case from his breast pocket the moment he had finished his communication to Von Berger. He leant back from his desk, and, one by one, turned over the papers the case contained. Finally he selected a letter written on thin paper, in a close, spidery hand. He read this letter through twice. His face was smiling as he read, but his eyes remained unchanging.

Finally he laid the letter down and copied into a notebook two addresses which had been carefully detailed in it. He read them over and verified them. One was in Kensington, and the other was described as being near a well-known market town in the county of Buckinghamshire. With this matter accomplished he glanced at the clock. Should he wait for lunch in the hotel, or should he run into the West End and regale himself at one of the fashionable restaurants? Finally the attractions of the latter triumphed in their appeal to his gastronomic senses and he telephoned down to the hall porter for a cab.

Von Salzinger had lunched well. He sat back in the taxi-cab in the attitude of a man enjoying the satisfaction of a more than well-lined stomach. Even, for the moment, as he leisurely smoked a great Corona cigar, and reflected on the quart bottle of Pol Roger '06 he had consumed, he felt that the position was not without its compensations, and, after all, in certain departments, the French and the long-legged English were not wholly to be despised.

Such was his satisfaction that his eyes were half closed by the time the cab jerked to a standstill outside a modest block of flats in Kensington. But he was alert in a second, for that was the man. His purpose at all times dominated, and only in the moments of leisure did he permit himself the indulgence he craved.

He negotiated with the cabman for a possible continuance of the journey, and passed into the building, his alertness and activity in no way impaired by the amplitude of his luncheon.

Five minutes later he returned with a cloud of annoyance depressing his heavy brows. He strutted up to the driver and gave his orders.

"We'll go on to Wednesford," he said, in his heavy guttural English. "You must have petrol, for I return to-night by eight o'clock. What is it, the distance? Twenty-five miles? So. It is easy to do."

The Londoner acquiesced without enthusiasm, and Von Salzinger reëntered the cab, and slammed the door closed behind him. That was his mood. He had been prepared to make the journey, but he was irritated that he had to do so.

In twenty minutes the cab had threaded its way on to the Oxford Road, and, regardless of all speed limit, raced on towards the famous Chiltern Hills.

Already the early autumn leaves were beginning to fall under the freshening breeze. The hedges were beginning to lose their trim appearance, and the dust-laden leaves on the midsummer growths wore a mildewed aspect that somehow matched the lank, weedy grass of the road banks. The roads were dry, and the fields looked dry. There was a weary look about the countryside as though Nature had completed her summer's work, and was eagerly looking forward to her winter rest.

A solitary horsewoman was leisurely riding down one of the tarred roads approaching Wednesford. Her horse was steaming, and her obvious intent was to cool him down before reaching her destination. Presently she turned off upon a narrow country lane, whose surface was no advertisement for the zeal of the local urban council. It was rough, and deep in dust, with overgrown hedges crowding in upon its narrow limits in a manner which forced her to keep an accurate middle course.

But Princess Vita was not only cooling down her horse after a joyous gallop upon an adjacent gorse-laden common. She was thinking deeply, dreaming as only a woman of romantic ideals can dream. Nor were her thoughts with the rural picture through which she was now moving, and which her ardent heart loved. She was gazing back over past moments so recently spent in the heart of the great capital. Just now her whole mind was filled with thoughts of *the man*. And so she had no room for any other consideration.

For the moment the affairs which had brought this man and herself together were powerless to disturb her dreaming. The sweet, fragrant air of the autumn countryside was filling her lungs, a sense of well-being pervaded her body in the exercise in which she delighted, and so the youthful heart of her had turned aside from the cares which lurked in the background, and sought only the image of the man who was already beginning to occupy so great a part of her life.

The Princess Vita was a well-known figure in the neighborhood. She was known as Madame Vladimir, who occupied Redwithy Farm, standing in a sleepy hollow nearly two miles outside Wednesford. She had occupied the farmhouse for several years, and gossip, supported by the reports of the local police during the late war, declared that she was a refugee from Russian Poland, and consequently one of our Allies, and so those who lived sufficiently near by had set themselves to be kind to her, and, incidentally, to satisfy as much of their curiosity as possible.

But the Princess was not easily available to the curious. She was gentle, she was sufficiently ordinary in her methods of life to please the most exacting of her country neighbors. Furthermore, while professing some Polish religion which the country folk had no understanding of, in the absence of a church of her own she had readily adopted the Church of England. This was enormously in her favor, and she quickly became an admittedly proper person.

But even the most well-meaning never succeeded in penetrating beneath the surface of acquaintanceship. She was credited with being extremely well off. Redwithy Farm was a miniature, restored Elizabethan mansion of rare antiquity, set in the heart of a parkland of over eighty acres. During the war she had only kept English servants, some seven or eight, but from the moment peace had been declared these had been replaced one by one with foreigners, retainers from her own home in Poland.

No one seriously questioned the change. One and all admitted that the conditions of Poland after the war made it a charity on the part of Madame Vladimir to rescue these poor people from such a condition of devastation and afford them the blessings and peace of the English countryside.

So, through her own consummate tact, Vita was enabled to live more or less unquestioned in her English home. And such peace was justly her due, for her objects were simple and honest for the country of her adoption. She was preparing, as many another foreigner had done before her, a refuge in the hospitable heart of Britain for that father for whom she foresaw the growing threat of danger.

Half-way down the winding, narrow lane she turned out through an opening which had once been a five-barred gate. She crossed a field and passed into another, and then another. Then, making her way through a small iron gateway, she entered the twenty-acre patch of larch and birch woods which stood on a hill on her own land dominating the farm.

Following the narrow cart track through these woods, her fine eyes busy in every direction with the scuttling rabbits, she emerged in full view of the quaint old L-shaped house. It was a perfect picture of rural England. There was not another house in sight. Redwithy Farm seemed to be shut off from the rest of the world by the hilly surroundings of the Chilterns. The land rose up on every side but one, and that was the direction in which the ribbon-like drive wound its way eastwards between the railed-in pastures of rich grassland. The building was two-storied for the most part, but here and there dormer attic windows peeped out under the eaves of the beautifully cut thatched roof. Then, behind the house itself lay the old farm buildings, all in excellent repair, and in another direction were the heavy ancient red walls surrounding the various fruit gardens and glass ranges.

Vita loved the place, and never more appreciated it than when gazing at it from this view-point. Just now there was the added charm of the ripening autumn tints lending warmth to the scene and adding to it that snug suggestion of shelter from the coming inclemencies of winter.

But in the midst of her happy contemplation she became startled. The wonderful peace of it all was abruptly broken. Round the corner of the straight-limbed woods, to the east, a motor vehicle made its appearance. It came on swiftly down the drive. At first Vita took it to be the car of some caller from the neighborhood, but, in a moment, the familiar outline of a taxi-cab impressed itself upon her.

This realization was the startling part of the apparition, and, without hesitation, she pressed her horse on towards the house.

Vita's hasty return to the house was inspired by an intangible dread. There was no such thing as a taxi-cab in Wednesford. Therefore her visitor must have come from farther afield. There was only one place in her mind associated with taxi-cabs—London. If the cab came from London, then ——

Her undefined fears received ample confirmation on reaching the house. Herr von Salzinger was awaiting her in the drawing-room. And at once she realized, without having admitted it to herself, that this was the very thing she had dreaded. How could she have admitted it? It had seemed impossible. Her retreat was known to no one but her father. How then had this man discovered it—and so promptly?

The riddle of it left her troubled. She must somehow gain time to think. Finally, she gave word to the sallow dark-eyed man-servant that she would join Herr von Salzinger in the drawing-room in a few minutes. Then she passed up-stairs to change her habit.

Half an hour later she entered the drawing-room, a picture of such beauty as set the strong pulses of the Prussian hammering, and made him, for the moment, at least, remember only one side of the decision which had brought him to Redwithy Farm.

Vita's ready wit had been active. She had decided on her course of action, and greeted him now with an assumption of warmth which flattered him, and helped to disarm.

"Ludwig von Salzinger!" she cried, her hand outheld in cordial welcome. "You, in London, after all this time? How have you managed to tear yourself from the paths of honor, which, if all accounts be true, you have so familiarly been treading of late? Do you know, when I saw your familiar features last night in that cab I really couldn't believe it was you. And how—how in the name of all that's wonderful did you manage to find me out here?"

Her assumption of pleasure was perfect. Its sincerity even convinced the man who had come prepared for a rebuff.

He laughed in responsive cordiality. But his eyes somehow retained their normal hardness of expression.

"Do not let us talk of how I found you out," he said. "It is likely to arouse—memories. You see, I have still many friends in this England—of yours."

"Mine?" Vita shrugged her superb shoulders, and crossed over to the mantelpiece, where she stood resting an elbow upon it. "But I know what you mean." She sighed a regret. "You found me through your old Secret Service friends. I ought to have remembered." Then she smiled, and her eyes fixed themselves intensely upon the gross face of the man. "But I wanted to forget that. I wanted to remember only the man who had risen by the force of his own personality and attainments to high military command in our beloved Fatherland. You see, *General*, there is no woman but delights in the advancement of her friends over the open road of honor. The secret, underground roads,"—she shook her head,—"no, they are not for a woman's delight in her—friends. They may be necessary, but—they are—underground."

Her purpose was better achieved than perhaps she knew. At the same time, however, she was incurring a serious risk in another direction. The passions of this Prussian were easily stirred. They had been stirred before when he had been younger, when perhaps his experience had not inspired him with so much of the cynicism and selfishness which had come to him through the ruthlessness of his recent campaigning. His ideals of womanhood, if he had ever really possessed any, were now completely negligible. Never in his doctrine could woman be anything but the amusement of man. This Princess at one time had suggested to his mind a means of advancement in his career. Now she was merely the daughter of the man who had sought to injure him, a man whom he was convinced was a traitor to his country. She was even something more than merely his daughter. She was something in this man's schemes and plans. This being so, he was left without compunction regarding her. She was beautiful and—a woman. He was a man. Moreover he felt that his was the power to impress his will upon her in any direction he chose. This was the Prussian who ever reckons without his adversary.

Von Salzinger settled himself in a comfortable chair and spread out his legs, while Vita pressed an electric bell.

"Maybe," he said drily. "But those underground channels have served me well—in the present instance. So I can't feel as you do towards them. Do you know, Princess," he went on, with greater warmth, "the sight of you last night left me no longer master of myself. Even then I knew where to find you. Seeing you again impelled me here to-day. I could not wait. I have come here to England in my first leisure to see you—in the hopes that you have at least forgiven if not forgotten our last meeting. You see, I was so much younger then, if not in years at least in the knowledge of those things which humanly speaking really matter. Four years! It seems a lifetime since I was with you."

At that moment the man-servant entered with the tea-tray. Ludwig von Salzinger watched him curiously as he set it before his mistress, in front of the crackling log fire. When the man had withdrawn Vita smiled across at him.

"Tea?" she enquired. "It is British—this tea habit.

There are other refreshments if you prefer them, and—you may smoke. We have the house to ourselves. I have given orders. I could not have your visit disturbed by the possible intrusion of—neighbors."

At this fresh mark of the woman's cordiality even the cold eyes began to melt. Von Salzinger was rapidly abandoning himself to the pleasure of the moment. This woman stirred the full depths of passion in him. None had stirred them more deeply. He admitted it, and, with his admission, he promised himself the harvest of the power that was his.

He accepted a cup of tea and lit a cigar.

"Then perhaps you have forgiven the—past?" he said, with assurance.

Vita shrugged. But her smile was radiant.

"We all make mistakes in—our inexperience."

"Yes." The man sipped his tea noisily. Then for a moment he stirred it.

"Tell me," he went on abruptly. "It is four years—nearly—since you told me all you felt about—espionage. It is a long time and much has happened. You have many friends here in England. Still you remain—simply the daughter of your father? Am I rude?" Vita had glanced over at him swiftly, seriously. "You see it is much to me, for—I came over to see you."

He had taken care that she should have no misunderstanding of his meaning. She displayed no resentment, but her eyes lowered to the tea-things she was manipulating. The man abruptly sat forward in his chair.

"I must say what is on my mind. It is my way, Vita. You know that of old. I saw you last night with a man, a stranger to me. And"—he smiled, and leant more urgently towards her,—"I was mad—mad with jealousy. I did not know him. I had no means of knowing him, since I have been isolated away on my command, and I thought, I felt convinced he was your—lover. Ach, it made me mad—mad. So I dared not delay. I must see you at once—at once and learn the truth from you. You must know, Vita, that I love you just as I have always loved you. All the rest—what is it? My position? Nothing. Nothing to compare with my love for you. Then my first sight of you after all this time is with that man—a good-looking man—in the car. You together—alone. I thought—oh, I was convinced he was your husband, and I—I could have killed him. Will you tell me of him? Is he? Is he your lover? You must tell me."

Through her drooping lashes Vita was watching him. There was a curious manner in the man. He was not pleading. He was telling her of his feelings as though she had no alternative but to accept them. She was alarmed, but gave no sign.

She decided swiftly upon her next attitude. It must be frankness. She must keep, hold this man, and convince him that she had nothing to do with, and no knowledge of, Ruxton Farlow's movements. If she failed in this, then ——

She laughed musically, a deep, soft laugh. The eyes which were raised to Von Salzinger's were full of amusement.

"The same headstrong, impetuous Ludwig. The years have not changed you," she said, shaking her head. "Ruxton Farlow is just one of many men friends I have over here. You cannot expect a woman of my position to live the life of a nun. I dined with him last evening. When we encountered you he was driving me home in his car. Have I committed a crime?"

"Here?"

There was a subtle brutality in the man's monosyllable.

Vita flushed. The amusement in her eyes had changed to a sparkle of anger. She shrugged.

"If you adopt that tone I have nothing more to say on the matter."

The man realized his mistake and changed his tone at once.

"Forgive me, Vita," he cried hastily. "It—it is jealousy. I cannot bear to think of you with that man—alone—or any other man. They have no right to you. They are natural enemies of our country. I—I am a Prussian, and you—you belong to our country. Can you not understand my feelings? Ach! It is maddening to think."

Vita's smile was wholly charming as she glanced at him across the tea-table.

"You are going to make me quarrel with you—again. And I don't want to quarrel. Tell me—about yourself and your affairs. They are more interesting. Tell me of that upward path—of that high command you occupy."

For some moments Ludwig von Salzinger did not reply. He had no desire to change the subject. His only interest in Vita was her beauty, her splendid womanhood; her appeal to his baser senses. His hard eyes regarded her unsmilingly for some moments. Then his nature drove him to the blunder which the woman had been awaiting.

"My affairs have no interest just now," he said, almost sombrely.

Vita caught at his reply with all her readiness.

"But they have—for your friends. Your old friends," she said, with well-assumed earnestness.

"Have they?" The man laughed bitterly. "I wonder." Again his greedy eyes had settled upon her with that curious regard which all good women resent.

At last Vita threw her head up in a manner which definitely but silently made her protest plain. Von Salzinger was forced to speech.

"For the moment the upward path is closed to me," he admitted coldly. "I no longer occupy my command. Do—you understand?"

But Vita shook her head.

In a moment there came an outburst of passion. It was the outburst of a headstrong man, which robs him of half his power in more delicate situations.

"I have been relieved of my command," he cried, springing to his feet and standing over her before the little tea-table. "For the moment my enemies have triumphed. But it will not be for long," he went on, working himself up till he almost forgot whom he was addressing. "The enemies of Ludwig von Salzinger do not triumph for long, and then we shall see. Oh, yes, we shall see."

Vita nodded sympathetically up at the passionate face.

"And you came to London, and," she added subtly, "you left your enemies behind you."

The man flung his cigar end in among the glowing logs with a vicious gesture.

"Some of them," he cried fiercely. Then he abruptly recovered himself. He began to laugh. The change was awkward, and the cunning that crept into his eyes was perfectly apparent to Vita. "Yes, I leave them behind me, where we are told to put all evil things. London is safer for me—at present. Besides, does it not bring me to your side?"

Vita had learned all she wanted to know in his brief admission. "Some of them," he had flung at her in his unguarded moment. The rest of it had no interest for her. She rose from her chair, and forced herself to a radiant smile.

"You are too deep for me, Ludwig," she cried, purposely using the intimate form of address. "But no one realizes your capacity better that I. I have known you so long. You will fight your battles successfully I am sure. Must you be going?"

The man was left without alternative. He had not thought of departure yet. He hesitated. Then he finally held out a hand. Vita only too readily responded. In a moment his hot clasp smothered hers. His eyes narrowed as they held hers, and the woman gathered something of the threat behind them.

"It is not good to be my enemy," he said unpleasantly. "Those who make an enemy of me will howl for mercy before I finish with them." Then his manner lightened to a tone Vita feared even more than the other. "But why talk of these things? I only think of you—dream of you. And some day," he went on, still retaining her hand in his, "you will be—kind to me. Eh? Is it not so? Surely—for it is our fate. And what a fate for any man, my Vita—my beautiful Vita. It will be—wonderful, wonderful."

The woman withdrew her hand sharply. She could stand no more of it. A growing terror was taking possession of her. Von Salzinger laughed as he released her hand with a final pressure. "It is good-bye now, but I shall come again, and then—again."

Vita was standing before the fire gazing down into its ruddy depths. The tea-things had been removed, and she was alone. She was glad. She was relieved. But she was not dissatisfied on the whole.

She felt that Von Salzinger was a greater blunderer than she had hoped. She knew he had blundered twice. He had blundered in visiting her at all. He had betrayed his whole purpose as surely as though he had told her all the details of his plans.

But with her satisfaction was a deep element of fear—personal fear. But she knew it was a fear—a weakness—that must not be encouraged. If it mastered her she would be left powerless to carry through the part she felt she had yet to play. So she resolutely thrust it from her. Meanwhile, her first duty must be to communicate with her father, and that—at once.

CHAPTER XVI

ENEMY MOVEMENTS

BUSY days crowded upon Ruxton Farlow. The house in Smith Square only saw him at night-time, or at the political breakfasts which had become so great a fashion. The affairs of his portfolio moved automatically with but very little personal attention from him, and so he was left free to prosecute his own more secret plans, almost without interruption.

Apart from the affairs at the great Dorby works, his chief effort was a campaign of proselytism amongst the few of great position in the nation's affairs whose conviction and prejudice must be overborne. And no one knew better than he the meaning of such an undertaking in Britain.

For once, perhaps for the first time in the history of Great Britain, such an effort had been made possible through the reaction from ineptitude to the splendid unity and enthusiasm of the great National Party, of which he was a member. He had struck, at once, before the simmering down to conflict of influences had set in, and his decision and judgment had not been without their reward.

So his hours were spent in close communion with such men as Sir Meeston Harborough and the Marquis of Lordburgh; Sir Joseph Caistor and a few others who headed the party. Breakfasts and luncheons were his battle-fields. But week-ends for dilettante golf at Dorby Towers, which frequently developed into visits to the great yards at Dorby itself, were no mean factors in the success of his efforts.

It was from a luncheon in Downing Street that he emerged one afternoon on foot into the great official thoroughfare of Whitehall. It had been a very small but very successful function from his point of view. It had followed upon a week-end at Dorby Towers, at which the President of the Board of Admiralty, Sir Reginald Steele, had given his final verdict upon the new constructions in process at the Dorby yards. It had been more than favorable. It had very nearly approached enthusiasm. And in its expression Sir Reginald had swept away the final doubts of both the Prime Minister and the Foreign Secretary.

Even now, as he swung into Whitehall with long vigorous strides, the Prime Minister's words were still ringing in his ears.

"You have our approval and support, my boy," he had said in his quick, nervous way. "Go ahead, and when the time comes do not hesitate to look to us. We shall do everything we can to support your efforts; that is," he added, with a whimsical, twinkling smile, "subject, of course, to the permission of a certain section of the ha'penny press."

There was still a suggestion of summer in the autumn air, but the sky had lost its brilliancy, and the inevitable grey of smoke was beginning to settle upon the city. For Ruxton, however, it might have been spring. The vigor of his gait, his delighted feelings, certainly belonged to the birth rather than the old age of the summer. He saw nothing of that which moved and passed about him. His busy thoughts were alive only with those enthralling concerns which were his. Nothing seemed able to stir him out of his abstraction until a street arab selling papers, who had recognized him, with the humorous effrontery of his class raised a newspaper poster for his inspection, and almost thrust it under his nose.

"'Ere y'are, governor. Better 'ave one. Kaiser Bill an' old Tirps scrappin' it out in the Baltic."

There was no avoiding it. The boy's persistence would not be denied. Ruxton glanced at the contents bill, and a startled look crept into his eyes.

"HEAVY FIRING IN THE BALTIC
MYSTERY UNSOLVED"

Ruxton purchased a paper and passed on. But his eager eyes scanned the stop press paragraph as he went. It was a report from Copenhagen. It stated that heavy gunfire had been heard off the German coast, and fishermen stated that a German squadron had been seen twenty miles from land engaged in what appeared to be a heavy bombardment of some object in the water. It was also stated that seaplanes had been seen to be dropping bombs on the same object. Another report, from a German source, stated that a portion of the fleet had been engaged in long-range target practice. This was denied in a still further account from the captain of one of the Baltic ferries, who declared that no target had been visible to those on his vessel, which had suddenly found itself in the danger zone, with shells dropping in the water within a radius of a quarter of a mile.

A still later account hinted that the whole thing was an attempt to sink a foreign submarine discovered in the act of espionage.

It was this final paragraph which held Ruxton's attention and permanently altered the whole trend of his thoughts. The affairs discussed at the recent luncheon had been abruptly thrust out of his mind. His final triumph over prejudice and official conservatism seemed to have lost its meaning for the moment. The whole centre of his interest had been completely transferred. He was gazing out across the sea, a grey, dark, troubled autumn sea. A fierce and awe-inspiring picture filled his focus. A squadron of battleships; the hawk-like swooping of great seaplanes; a small, almost indistinct object bobbing amongst the waves. He remembered his escape from Borga. Something of such a scene had been acted there, only in that case the battleships had been absent, and in their place had been guns trained, with every spot on the narrow water carefully measured out. Was this such an adventure as his? He could not tell. But ——

At that moment he hailed a passing taxi, and, giving the man an address in Kensington, he jumped in.

He folded up his paper and thrust it into a side pocket, and, with the sudden change of environment, his thoughts underwent a third development.

Somewhere in the west, there, he knew that a woman was waiting impatiently for his news. He had 'phoned her of his coming, and hinted at his success. Her reply had set every pulse in his body hammering out a reciprocal emotion.

"Of course you have succeeded," she had replied. "The rapidity with which you have done so only the more surely points my original conviction. You cannot fail. I shall be in Kensington until a late hour."

The invitation had been irresistible to a man of Ruxton's temperament. He snatched at it with an almost boyish impulse, determined to lose no moment of communion with this wonderful creature whose attractions had so overwhelmed the youth that was in him. He knew that whatever the future might hold for him there could be nothing comparable with the wonderful stirring which the bare thought of her created in him.

As he drove along her image was before his smiling dark eyes. The grey glory of her deeply fringed eyes had a power to thrill him as nothing else in life could. Her beautiful, oval face, so full of a power to express every emotion, suggested to him the mirror-like surface of a sunlit lake reflecting the wonders of a perfect life. The radiance of her smile alone seemed to him worth living for.

The heart of the man had been unloosed from the bondage of early restraint. Now it was a-riot, claiming in its freedom an excess of interest for its years of deprivation. He had no power nor desire to check it. It was as though a new life had opened out before eyes which had all too long confronted the sober grey of mere existence, a life which had been hidden behind a dark curtain raised at last only to dazzle and amaze.

Mrs. Jenkins, a hard-faced lady with a sniff, who had undoubtedly seen " worse " days, had performed her duty as only a superior British char-lady-turned-cook-housekeeper could have possibly performed it. She had regarded Ruxton Farlow on the door-step of Vita's flat for a few speculative moments. Then she sniffed.

"Name of Farlow, ain't it? She's in."

Then, shuffling down the passage, she thrust her head through the doorway of the sitting-room and sniffed again.

"It's 'im, miss," she announced, and beat a strategical retreat to the back regions of the flat, with the virtuous conviction that she had performed her duty in a manner which might well have been an example to a superior parlor-maid, or even a well-trained footman.

There seemed to be no necessity for greeting between Vita and Ruxton Farlow. For the man it was as if Vita had become a part of his life, as though she were always with him, ready to support him at every turn, ready to lead him on towards those great ideals which were his.

Just now the commonplaces of social intercourse had no meaning for Vita. She drew an armchair from its inevitable place beside the cold fireplace, and faced it towards the window, flinging the meagre cushion aside, so useless to a man's comfort.

"Take that chair," she said, with a warm smile of welcome. "You may smoke, too; I'd like you to. And there is refreshment on the table beside you." Then she seated herself upon a low chair in the vicinity. "Now tell me," she added, as Ruxton flung himself into the doubtful armchair with a contented sigh.

"Tell you?" he returned, with a smile in his dark eyes.

Then for some moments he was silent, contemplating the perfect oval of her face, the masses of her red-gold hair; the wonderful grace of the exquisitely clad body But under his gaze her warm grey eyes were hidden. She felt the ardor of the man's regard, nor did it leave her unmoved.

"There ought to be a lot to tell you—there is a lot," he said presently, in a half-abstracted manner. "And yet ——"

"Begin at the beginning," she helped him, and his eyes were caught in the upward glance of the wonderful grey, so eager, so clear, and yet so full of simple purpose.

"The beginning?" Ruxton smiled. "It makes it the harder." He shook his head. "No man can tell a woman the beginning. There is no beginning. It just comes along without his knowing it, and, in a moment, he is caught in mid-tide and borne along."

Vita's eyes were gazing up into the strong face in some doubt. She was demanding the story of his success. Something she beheld in the man's dark eyes made her lower her own, and she found herself powerless to urge him further. An absurdly chaotic feeling had suddenly taken possession of her, and amidst that chaos was a great and wonderful dread that had nothing fearful or terrifying in it. Yet the dread was there, a dread which urged her to flee from his presence, and hide herself somewhere, whither he could not follow. But opposed to such feeling was a fascination which held her waiting, waiting upon his words.

Her attitude conveyed something of the emotions his words had inspired, but Ruxton was incapable of interpreting them. He was absorbed in the triumph of his own feelings. His success in affairs of that day had intoxicated him. And their outcome was a wild desire to go further and crown them with the achievement of the passion of love which had set fire to his soul. He yearned for the love of this woman, and such was the impetuous tide let loose that there, and now, he must stake his whole future happiness on one single throw. Caution had no place when his passionate heart was stirred. Caution, and all its concomitants, were for the business of life. In the emotional side of him they had no place, they could never have place.

"I may be mad, I may be dreaming," he cried, suddenly springing to his feet and confronting the woman he loved with eyes grown darker with the sudden intensity of his feelings. "I may be mad to risk forever losing a companionship which has become so great a part of my life, so vital to my whole existence. I may be dreaming to believe, or hope, that my longings can ever reach fulfillment. But I cannot help it. It is not in me to act otherwise. The soul-mate of a man either belongs to him, or is denied to him, as the great controlling forces ordain. For thirty-five years I have walked through life alone. I have seen no woman whose companionship I desired, or could desire, during all that time. Never once in all that time have the soul-fires in me been stirred. Never once have I longed for the warm heart of a woman to beat in unison with mine. Then came a night—a mentally black and dreary night—when the work seemed desolate, and existence a condition almost intolerable in the future. The darkest thoughts of my life passed through my hot brain that night; darker even than the thoughts during the darkest days of the great war. That moment was the one that preceded dawn—my dawn.

"Ah, Vita," he went on, with deeper, more vibrant meaning. "That dawn came like the miracle of every other dawn. But, unlike the dawn which heralds mere sunrise, it heralded an eternity of beautiful dreams untouched by the bitternesses and contentions of the human day. It came with a voice out of the moonlit darkness. The voice of a woman, who, within a space of time almost negligible, had changed the despairing blackness of night to a—wonderful dawn."

Ruxton turned from her and began to pace the narrow length of the room. It was an unstudied expression of the fierce fire which had leapt up in his passionate, Slavonic heart. Vita's eyes followed his movements, fascinated yet unseeing in the tumult which he had roused within her. For her his words, his sudden outburst, had reduced to concrete form all that gamut of feeling which had been hers from the moment of their first encounter. All unacknowledged, the latent power of this man's personality had absorbed her every feeling. He was the one out of all the world. His handsome head, his superb body, so strong, so perfectly poised, but above all that wonderful idealism which saw so clearly through the fog of sordid influences which clogged all real progress. Almost breathless she waited while he went on.

He paused in his walk and abruptly flung out his arms.

"I can see her now, a figure of perfect beauty, regal, splendid in the silvery moonlight. The light playing upon her marbled features, finding reflection in eyes wide with sincerity, truth and passion. Vita, Vita, I can never tell you all that picture inspired in me. Suddenly I knew what life meant. Up till then I had merely existed. Life had had no meaning for me but the necessity of working out that simple duty of effort which belongs to us all. With your coming everything changed. Life became at once that superb thing of which the dreamer speaks. Where before only the black shadows of a drear depression had been, at once life became flooded with a golden light. It was beautiful, beautiful."

The woman's wondering gaze was now frankly held by the passionate eyes regarding her. She had no power to withdraw it, she had no desire to withdraw it. Her cheeks were flushed. Her lips were parted, revealing the pearly whiteness of her teeth framed in their ruby setting, so full, so ripe.

"But this is madness," she breathed without conviction. It was the burden of her feelings seeking expression. She leant forward in her chair, her hands so tightly clasped that the blood was pressed back from her delicate finger-tips, and the simple rings dug hard into the tender flesh.

"Madness? Madness?" Ruxton drew nearer. He laughed as he echoed the word. It was the inconsequent laugh which is merely an audible expression and possesses no meaning. "If it is madness let me be mad. Madness? Then I never want sanity again. Love is madness, Vita, a madness that is ordained, and without it love can never be love. The man who can pause to reason does not know love. He can never love. Leave reason and sanity for the cold affairs of life. Love can know no check from such a course. That is how I love you, Vita. I want you—you. I want you always with me, near me. I want you so that our life together is all one. You must be part of me. You must be me. You speak of the beginning. There is no beginning, just as there can be no end. Love is all, everything. Vita—Vita ——"

He had bent down from his great height. He had seized the woman's tightly clasped hands. He had raised them with gentle force, and, as though caught by the magnetism of all the love he had endeavored to express, she rose to her feet, and permitted him to hold her prisoner before him.

But now with his final appeal the tension seemed to relax. She stood there for a moment, silent. Then she sighed faintly. It was as though she had awakened from some beautiful dream. The flush on her oval cheeks lessened, and the light in her eyes changed unmistakably. The man seemed to become suddenly aware of the change, and a note of apprehension sounded in his voice as he repeated his appeal.

"Vita—Vita," he cried, with a passion of yearning in the words.

The woman shook her head, but her hands remained captive.

"No, no! It can't be. It is too beautiful, too good to be real. Not in this life. This life in which there is no peace—nothing that is—beautiful. Besides ——"

"Besides?"

Again Vita shook her head. This time she gently released her hands. Ruxton contemplated her. Something in her manner was restoring his control of himself.

"We cannot—we dare not think of—ourselves now," Vita went on. "A time may come when—but not now. We must not pause—nor step aside."

Each word appeared to be an effort. It was as though she were fighting temptation in a forlorn hope. Ruxton saw it. He understood, and his whole Slavonic passion took fire again. Quite suddenly his two great hands fell upon the woman's rounded shoulders, and his strong fingers held the soft flesh firmly. Her face was turned up to his in a startled fashion, wondering but unresentful. His passion-lit eyes gazed deeply down into hers.

"Vita, my Vita, these protests are not you. They are the brave and loyal spirit seeking to abnegate those selfish claims which in my case are irresistible. You—you will love me. You do love me! I can see it in your eyes—now. God, was there ever so wonderful a sight for man? Tell me. Forget all else and tell me of it. I am hungry—starving for the love you can give me. I will not wait. I dare not. I love you with all that is in me. I love you beyond all earthly duties and cares. Tell me all that lies behind your beautiful eyes, hidden deep down in your dear woman's heart."

Vita was powerless. She was utterly powerless to resist the torrent of the love that leapt from him and overwhelmed her. All her protests died within her. She imperceptibly drew closer to him, and, in a moment, she lay crushed in his arms, her face hidden against his broad shoulder, the perfume of her hair intoxicating him still further. His head bent down against it and his lips rained caresses upon it. Then, in a second, one hand was raised and he lifted her face from its hiding-place so that his eyes gazed full upon it. Then, lower his face bent towards hers, and in a ravishing silence their lips met, and held for long, long moments.

The evening shadows were softly drawing their veil about them. The plain little room had lost its crudeness of outline. Ruxton was seated in the armchair which had been set for him, and Vita was crouching curled up on the cushion on the floor close beside him. Ruxton was smoking now. He had been smoking for some minutes. Vita was listening to the voice she loved, and occasionally interrupted it with a question or comment.

He had just completed the story of his success, and her delight in it had held the woman forgetful of those things she had yet to tell to him.

But now, in the silence which had followed, a flood of recollection spread over her. She searched for a beginning with a brave desire to reveal as little of the disquiet which haunted her as possible.

"I have no such success to recount," she said at last, gazing up at the strong face above her with a tender smile of confidence. "I have heard from Von Salzinger, as I knew I should after that evening in—the car."

"Ah!"

Ruxton laid a hand firmly over one of Vita's, which rested on the arm of the chair. It was a gesture which had in it all a strong man's promise of protection. To Vita it conveyed a sensation of exquisite reassurance.

"Oh, it all seems so futile," she cried, with a sudden helplessness. "I mean when you think of the terrible Secret Service which seems to know everything. No one in England except ourselves knows of such a person as Valita von Hertzwohl. As for my home, only my father knows that. I have kept it secret even from you. And yet this Von Salzinger comes to England and—calls upon me. The refuge I had so carefully prepared for my father in case of emergency is—no refuge at all. I believe I am terrified."

"Tell me more." Ruxton leant forward in his chair.

All satisfaction at the thought of his own affairs had died out of his expressive eyes. They were full of concern and sympathy for the woman he loved. "Where is this home? I had better know—now."

Vita smiled tenderly. His trifling emphasis on the final word helped to banish something of her fears. It was the reminder of the bond between them.

"It is the sweetest of aged Elizabethan farms in Buckinghamshire. It is called Redwithy Farm, and is less than two miles from Wednesford. It is the most romantically beautiful place you could find anywhere, small, but—I love it." She sighed deeply. "I was out riding when he called. I had no alternative but to see him."

"Why?" The man's earnest gaze was steady. His alert mind was seeking something, nor did he know the nature of what he sought.

"Because Vassilitz had admitted him in my absence. He had no right to, but—he did. I cannot—but it doesn't matter now. I simply dared not refuse to see him, so I affected cordiality and—gave him tea."

Ruxton made an impatient movement.

"Who is Vassilitz? What is he?" he demanded in a level tone.

"My butler. He is a Pole—a German Pole. All my servants are Poles. I have known them all my ——"

"Ah. And you marvel at the power of the Secret Service?"

The gravity of her lover's tone startled Vita. But she could not credit his suspicion.

"But I have known them all my life. They are devoted to me and mine."

"Then I should know them no longer. But tell me of

Von Salzinger. He has found you out. It does not much matter how. The purpose of his visit. That is the important matter."

It was some moments before Vita replied. A fresh terror was slowly taking possession of her. After a while, however, she pulled herself together with an effort.

"He told me it was to see me. I have told you that years ago he made love to me. He pretended his visit was—to see me."

"Pretended?"

A furious jealousy was suddenly taking possession of Ruxton. Only by a powerful self-control was he keeping it under. Vita understood by the tone of his enquiry, and hastily sought to set his doubts at rest.

"Oh, but he is a loathsome creature." Then she turned to him and looked up into his dark eyes. "Ruxton, dear," she appealed, "never, never, never believe anything but that I loathe and fear that man."

The demon of jealousy died out of the man's eyes and he smiled.

"I never will believe otherwise, Vita," he reassured her. "Now tell me."

After that Vita told her story briefly and simply. But at its conclusion she asseverated her conviction emphatically.

"He was lying. It was patent to me. If he desired to make love to me it was incidental. He came because he and the rest of them are in hot pursuit of the Borga affair. He is over here to fight to retrieve the position from which we know he has fallen. What they will do, what they can do—here—I cannot imagine. But they are so subtle—so subtle."

Again that haunting fear had come back to her eyes Ruxton pressed her hand gently.

"I think you are wrong, dear," he said firmly. "I am sure of it. As you say, they are subtle. I am convinced his visit to you was—for you." Ruxton's eyes had grown darker, and his brows drew together. Apprehension was stirring, but it was apprehension for Vita. "You must not receive him again. I do not think it safe for you down there. I should give the place up—temporarily. Anyway it can be no safe refuge for your ——"

He broke off and sat up with a start. His caressing hand was drawn from hers with a suddenness that communicated some further anxiety to the woman. She watched him, searching his face while his hands groped in the side pockets of his coat.

"What is it?" she demanded, with a sharp intake of breath.

For reply Ruxton withdrew a newspaper folded, and held it out to her, pointing at the stop press paragraph on the outside fold.

"Read it," he said urgently.

She stood up and moved to the window for better light. He watched her while she read.

"Can it be ——?" he demanded, leaving his sentence unfinished.

Vita looked up at last. Her eyes were wide. A stunned look was in them. Her parched lips moved.

"Do you think it's father?" she asked. "Do you think he has got away?" Then, with a sudden appealing gesture: "Oh, say you do."

CHAPTER XVII

THE CROUCH OF THE TIGER

JOHANN STRYJ had departed as silently and undemonstratively as he had come. The chief spy was a born master of his craft. The only matter in which Nature had been less kind to him in his fitness for the work he had imposed upon himself was in the slightly furtive restlessness of his eyes. Otherwise the ideal had been achieved. His whole air of simple inoffensiveness left nothing to be desired.

Von Salzinger admitted these things to himself, in spite of the morose venom which the man's report upon Dorby had inspired.

This venomous mood, however, was not directed against his helper. It was inspired by his realization that his own purpose had been made more difficult of achievement. He had discovered that his efforts were not directed against private individuals, but against the British naval authority, an authority he had reason to know had nothing of the ineptitude of other departments of the Government.

Thus he sat back in the largest and most comfortable chair in his private sitting-room, with his trunk-like legs supported upon a smaller chair, and divided his savage mood between outlining the report he must now make to Berlin and the devouring of the contents of a large *bier-stein*, which stood on the table within reach.

He had nearly succeeded in achieving his double purpose, and incidentally relieving his unpleasant mood, when a diversion occurred in the form of a telephone summons from the hotel office below.

A visitor for him. Name of Von Berger. Would he see him at once?

Yes, Ludwig von Salzinger would be pleased to see him at once. This is what he 'phoned down. To himself he cursed bitterly in homely Prussian adjectives.

Von Berger was the last person he wanted to see in England until the outcome of his work was assured. This man's coming suggested all sorts of vague and disquieting thoughts. With Von Berger in England he would no longer be a free agent. He would be forced to yield the conduct of affairs to another—a man whom he felt had neither friendliness nor mercy for any soul on earth. He was more than disquieted. He was awed, and not a little apprehensive.

The latter was displayed in an almost schoolboy action that was pathetically humorous. He quickly removed his *bier-stein*—and concealed it.

The entrance of Von Berger was characteristic of the frigid, unyielding aspect he displayed at all times. No one could have encountered this personality and detected one soft spot in the whole of its make-up. It was almost as if something of the iron of his native Baltic shores had been bred into him through the ages of his ruthless ancestry. No iceberg in the northern reaches of his native inland sea could have gleamed more coldly bright than his hard eyes. No ice-bound crag could have been cut more sharply than the thin compressed lips of his set mouth.

He entered the room with cold assurance. He possessed himself of the chair which had supported Von Salzinger's legs, and occupied it without invitation. He indicated the armchair beside which Von Salzinger was standing, with the certainty of authority. And the lesser man sat in it, obedient to his visitor's lightest command. There was no greeting between them.

Von Berger's keen eyes searched the room. For a moment they rested upon the door which shut off the other's bedroom.

"That door?" he demanded.

"My bedroom, Excellency."

"Ah! Admission that way?"

"I keep the outer door locked."

The cold eyes surveyed the windows. They were closed. Then his regard came back to the heavy square face of his host.

"Von Hertzwohl has—escaped."

There was no emphasis; no heat of any sort. The lips moved, and the pronouncement was made. That was all.

Von Salzinger started. Then a half-smile grew in his eyes. In a vague way he realized that the Prince's flight was a triumph and vindication for himself. But his momentary satisfaction was damped by the cold voice of his visitor.

"On receipt of your report that you had discovered the identity of the man who visited Borga, vigilance was redoubled. For obvious reasons we had no desire to arrest him until more definite news was received. He had no suspicion that he was—observed. Then, suddenly he disappeared. We picked up his tracks. He had escaped by sea in his submersible. Our squadron very nearly effected his capture. However, he escaped. He must have received news from—here. He is probably making for—here. Have you any additional report to make?"

Von Salzinger cleared his throat. He sat up. The veins stood out upon his square temples. His momentary satisfaction was completely gone. In its place was a sickening apprehension that his enemy was slipping through his fingers, and in doing so it seemed more than likely he might contrive to make his, Von Salzinger's, position even less favorable with Berlin.

"Yes, Excellency. I was about to write one when I received the telephone message of your arrival."

"Let me have the details quickly and briefly."

"In the yards at Dorby in Yorkshire, owned by Farlow, Son and Farlow—Ruxton Farlow is a partner—certain portions of them have been taken over by the British Admiralty. But these portions are not being used for naval purposes. They are constructing a new type of mercantile submersible from foreign plans, which have only very recently come to England. The submersible portion of these vessels is the principle perfected by Hertzwohl in our naval submarines. The rest of them is an entirely new design. But the complete boat is the design of—one man."

"Hertzwohl."

"That is how I read it."

"The object of naval authority in these yards is ——?"

"Security and secrecy."

"Which proves the plans have either been stolen or traitorously acquired, and they fear interference and—reprisal."

Von Salzinger nodded.

"And this information?" Von Berger's enquiry came with even colder incisiveness.

"We have men working in the shops. We have one man in the drawing office. All hands, even the clerical staff of these departments, work under oath of secrecy, and naval discipline." Von Salzinger smiled contemptuously. "This, however, does not impede our flow of information. The man in the drawing office has discovered that the plans are shortly to be photographed by the naval authorities. Further, they are testing a new light which seems to correspond with our new U-rays, which was found to be defective by us, and the vital parts of which Hertzwohl removed on his last visit to Borga. If this light should prove to be identical with the U-rays it suggests a further conspiracy. Hertzwohl contrived its faultiness himself, and seized the opportunity of removing the vital parts of the—*only*—lamp we possessed. It suggests that the whole thing was carefully planned and carried out by—Hertzwohl."

The only sign from Von Berger was a curious flicker of the eyelids. The unyielding expression of his keen face never varied for one moment.

"This man Farlow—Ruxton Farlow?"

Von Salzinger shook his head.

"For the moment he is beyond our reach. He is a Minister in the British Cabinet."

"Yes."

For some moments neither spoke. Von Salzinger watched this man whom he feared more than any man in Berlin. He was wondering at the activity behind those cold eyes. He was speculating as to the direction in which that force would drive. He labored under no delusion. The conduct of this affair was to be removed from his hands. It was an added bitterness, but a certain relief left it not without compensation. If this matter were successfully dealt with, no matter by whom, it must redound to his advantage.

Von Berger did not leave him long in doubt.

"It may be possible to destroy those plans—before they are copied," he said. "If they have already been traced, still it will be a proper step. They may even have neglected to trace them—these English. I must see Stryj at once. You will telephone him. Not now," as Von Salzinger rose with alacrity to obey. "There is another matter to be dealt with first. Hertzwohl has got away. He must be silenced. He must be punished. If he is in England—of which I have no doubt, he would be even less safe elsewhere—he is to be run to earth, and his power for further mischief must be—cut off. You understand."

Von Salzinger's eyes were full of meaning as he nodded, but there was no fraction of change in the other's. Von Berger drew a note-book from his pocket, and turned some odds and ends of papers over. Finally he selected one.

He held it out, and his level eyes forced Von Salzinger's till the latter felt that the remotest secrets could be penetrated by their cold intensity.

"You know that place?" he enquired.

Von Salzinger read—

"REDWITHY FARM, WEDNESFORD, BUCKS."

He drew a deep breath. At the sound of it Von Berger's eyelids flickered.

"Yes." Von Salzinger's eyes were slowly raised to the other's.

"Quite so. You visited there the other day. For what purpose?"

"Information." There was a flush in the man's fleshy cheeks. He loathed and feared those searching eyes.

"Was your visit productive?"

Von Salzinger shrugged.

"No."

"We will visit there together and must make our visit productive. Vassilitz will expect us there to-night. If Hertzwohl is in England we must find him through the Princess Valita. Now send for Stryj."

CHAPTER XVIII

FROM BENEATH THE WATERS

THE appeal in Vita's voice, in her yearning, distressed eyes, when she demanded her lover's reassurance of her father's escape, was not without a powerful effect on the romantic chivalry which was so large a part of Ruxton's nature. It set every nerve in his body tingling to serve her. Then, too, the debt he owed to the Prince himself, in the name of his country, urged him.

That night he had bought later editions of the paper, seeking further news which might throw light upon the matter, and possibly yield an explanation of the Baltic incident which might relieve them of all anxiety. But none was forthcoming. The reports passed from the "stop press" to the news columns without added detail. Editorial speculation was added, but this afforded no clue to the unravelling of the mystery.

Then, at last, Ruxton took a decision. Its purpose was vague, but the impulse was irresistible. His whole thoughts focussed themselves upon Dorby and the work going on there. He had offered this foreigner the shelter of his home. He had impressed it upon him. It seemed to him that such being the case, should his anticipation prove correct, his place, at the moment, was unquestionably Dorby.

He communicated his feelings on the matter to Vita, who saw in his ideas the inspiration which he would never have admitted.

"If it should be that he has escaped those dreadful guns," she said, her hands clasped in an effort to steady herself, "Dorby is the place he will make for—the Old Mill Cove. Oh, my dear, my dear, can you not see what would happen if he arrived with no one there to caution him? He would make for Redwithy. He would come straight to me. And Von Salzinger would be ready for him. You will go? You will help him for my sake? Ah, thank you," as the man nodded his silent reassurance. "Meanwhile I will return home at once that I may be ready for every eventuality—and Von Salzinger. I will let you know any development."

So it came about that Ruxton found himself at Dorby Towers once more, in deep consultation with his father, who, with steady twinkling eyes, listened and advised with all the shrewd, calm wisdom of his clear commercial brain.

Nearly the whole of the next day was spent by Ruxton upon the cliffs, where, with powerful glasses, he searched the calm surface of the treacherous grey waters of the North Sea. His search remained unrewarded, but he was indefatigable. His watch was kept up with the aid of a confidential man of his father's to relieve him, and when evening came he decided that a night watch must follow the day. He had carefully calculated the time from the date and hour of the Baltic firing, and, in the light of the experience of his own journey to Borga, he calculated that if the Prince had actually escaped, and was making for Dorby, he would reach the coast some time during the next twelve hours.

From three o'clock in the afternoon until darkness set in he had rested, leaving his assistant on guard. Then he set out alone to keep his night vigil.

His way took him across the wild moorland in the direction of the black remains of the old mill, and, in setting out, he remembered that night which now seemed so far back in his memory, when, out of the darkness, he had heard those tones he had now come to love so well. This time, however, his dinner coat and thin shoes had been abandoned in favor of a heavy tweed ulster and thick shooting boots. For the autumn night was bitter with a light breeze from the northeast, and a great silvery moon, and the cold diamonds of a starlit sky, suggested that the speeding hours were likely to bring with them many degrees of frost before he could return to the warmth of his bed.

His direction gave him no trouble. Every foot of the moorland cliff was familiar to him with the instinct bred through childish years of association. Then there was the great, heavy moon yielding a light by which it would almost have been possible to read.

So he strode on towards his goal, the blackened skeleton, which marked the old dishonest times of battles fought out against authority. With the detachment of youth his thoughts had been left free to wander from the purpose of his journey. A deep concentration had completed every detail of the work that lay before him. And so the resiliency of his brain had caused a rebound to those wonderful thoughts which claimed his every human sensation.

He was thinking of Vita. His mental faculties had visualized once more the perfections which were hers, and those with which this love of his endowed her. His big heart was stirred to its very depths with the memory of her final, wistful appeal. He felt that if human effort could serve her, that effort, the whole of it that was in him, was at her service. He felt that all quite suddenly a great new power had been vouchsafed him, a power to do, to act, and to think—all for the woman who had inspired in him this wonderful, wonderful feeling of love.

Nothing, no task, no labor, however great, was too arduous for him to accomplish. More, it was a happiness, such as never in his life he had known, to be privileged with the task of contributing to her happiness.

In the mood of the moment he had no desire to look ahead. The concerns of the future belonged to the future. For him, in this matter, the present was all-sufficient. Next to him Vita loved her father. She had fearlessly undertaken work which might well have daunted any woman, to help him in his motives of humanity. Was there any more sublime motive for a woman's action? He thought not. And a wave of delighted appreciation swept over him. In the ghostly silvery light of that autumn night he thanked God that the love of such a woman had been vouchsafed him.

He reached the decayed surroundings of the old mill all too soon. But, with a readiness which found him stoically regretless, he probed once more the mysteries of the old mill. It was precisely as he had left it on his return from Borga, which seemed so long ago. He could detect no sign that any one had been near the place. He was glad. He felt its secret was still safe, and was yet a power to serve the woman he loved.

The journey through the bowels of the earth was one of simple accomplishment now. He even required no lantern. All that was necessary was the lighting of an occasional match to verify his positions.

At the cavern mouth he found that it was high tide. The rock-girt pit was darkly sombre, but the radiance of the moon was sufficient to outline the restless, lapping water's edge, which was all he needed. With some care he scrambled over the slippery boulders and finally made his way to a great projection which overhung the water some fifteen feet below, and took up his position upon its rugged, unyielding extremity. Here he sat in full view of the mouth of the great inlet, through which the waters were still churning. Beyond it, miles out to sea, he could observe every light or object silhouetted against the sky-line. But he knew that if Prince von Hertzwohl were making for the Old Mill Cove he would not approach it till the tide was at a low ebb. That would not occur for some hours.

The tide had long since fallen. It had been ebbing for nearly three hours and a half. So still was the air, so oppressive the sense of silent crowding by the towering cliffs about him, that Ruxton's ears had become attuned to every change in the sound of the lapping waters below him. He had recognized the period of slack water. Then he had caught and read the change of sound with the first signs of the ebb. Then again he had recognized its increasing speed. And all the time eyes and ears were straining for sight or sound from beyond the mouth of the cove. He had seen lights pass: slow, distinct, as some trader or trawler passed upon its chilly way. But these had been far beyond the range at which he expected the signs of the submersible.

It was warmer down in the cove than upon the moorland, but the chill of the night air was penetrating, and he huddled his neck down in the high upturned collar of his coat and drew its skirts closer about his knees. It was a dreary vigil, but his determination never wavered.

A few minutes later he produced a cigar, prepared to obtain the trifling comfort which tobacco might afford him, but, in the act of striking a match he abruptly abandoned the attempt. He flung it away and raised his night glasses. Some sound had caught his straining ears. It came from well beyond the towering gateway. It seemed to him like the vague and indistinct throb of powerful engines. After a moment's search the glasses revealed some dark bulk on the bosom of the sea. In a moment he was on his feet searching, searching.

Minutes passed. To him it seemed the bulk remained stationary, but its very indefiniteness left him doubting. At last he lowered his glasses and gave himself up to listening. Then he prepared to light his cigar again. He could hear no sound of engines now. He —— A light had flashed out! Instantly a responsive thrill passed down through his sensitive nerves.

Now the rapidly passing moments each brought their developments. He could hear the voices of men plainly in the dead silence of the night. They must be near, dangerously near to the treacherous opening. He could see other lights, moving lights, like lanterns being borne along a deck by hand. Then he heard the clanking of cable chains. Finally a larger light, something in the nature of a small searchlight, detached itself from the others, and came directly towards the opening.

He turned away and lit his cigar. Then he scrambled down to the beach.

Ruxton had remained in obscurity watching the light as it passed through the opening. It came on swiftly against the racing tide. There was no hesitation or indecision. The light steered straight for the spit of rock forming a sort of natural quay, upon which he was standing under cover of a projecting boulder. There was no longer any doubt in his mind. He remembered that other time when he had embarked at the same spot.

The launch slowed down and crept towards the rocky tongue. The landing was brilliantly lit up by the searching headlight. Slower, slower, it finally glided into the landing-place and was held fast by two heavy figures now clearly outlined.

A third figure rose up amidships—a tall, familiar figure, clad in a long enveloping cloak. He spoke once. Then he stepped actively on to the landing. Ruxton emerged from the shadow.

"Welcome, Prince. It is I, Ruxton Farlow."

He had stepped forward with hand outheld.

At the first sound of his voice the men in the boat had become still. The Prince had swung round, and his right hand had been plunged deeply into the pocket of his great cloak. But a moment later it was withdrawn, and a deep-throated laugh expressed his relief.

"Ah, my friend," he cried. "I thought"—then he grasped the outstretched hand in warm cordiality,—"then I heard your name, and knew my alarms were groundless. You have come here to—meet me?"

"Yes. We guessed."

"Ah. Forgive me. I must give some orders."

He was about to turn away to the men in the boats, but Ruxton detained him.

"Before you give orders, I would suggest you send your vessel round to Dorby. Our dock-master is on the lookout for you. He is lying off the mouth of the river to pilot you in to a—*safe*—mooring. When you hail him, pass him one word: 'Towers.' My father is awaiting you at home. We have thought out a plan which may meet with your approval."

The tall figure moved a step nearer. Again his tenacious hand was thrust out.

"It is always the same—in Britain. I thank you."

He turned and gave orders in compliance with Ruxton's instructions. Then the two men stood side by side while they watched the launch slide back with the tide. Then, as it swung about, head on for the opening, they moved away up towards the cavern entrance in the cliff.

Throughout the passage of the cave, and the long climb up the rough-hewn staircase to the mill above, no unnecessary word was spoken. An occasional warning of trifling pitfalls ahead from Ruxton, on the lead, was the only sound beyond the clatter of feet upon the rough stone tread of the journey.

There was much to be said between them, but each felt that the dank atmosphere of this cavern was scarcely the place in which to pause for confidences. This was a meeting between these two full of profound significance, even of threat, for both knew that a challenge had been thrown out at a power for vengeance, the extent of which neither could as yet accurately estimate.

The silence between them was maintained until the outline of the old mill had fallen away well behind them, and the intricacies of the footpaths amongst the black gorse patches permitted of their walking abreast. Then it was Ruxton who opened the subject between them.

"I bought a newspaper almost by chance. It contained news of some action by the German fleet—in the Baltic. It was vague. But somehow it made me uneasy. Then Vita seemed to read it aright."

"Vita?"

"Ah, forgive me," Ruxton smiled. "The Princess interpreted it. We became convinced that it was something to warrant alarm for—your safety."

The tall, lean figure pressed nearer to its English friend. Ruxton felt the clasp of a hand upon his upper arm.

"And so you came—to the cove?"

There was a deep note of appreciation in the man's voice.

"It was a friendly act," he added.

Ruxton shrugged.

"I promised you a welcome in England. It is nothing."

"No. It is nothing—to some people."

Ruxton dismissed the subject.

"They have discovered. Von Salzinger is in England."

"Yes, Vita has told me. But I knew it without the telling." Then the Prince laughed, and there was ironical inflection in his mirth. "Oh, yes. It was easy to watch—these things. I watched every move through the eyes of my few faithful friends. I saw how they kept me under surveillance, after—after they sent Von Salzinger to England. Then, when I began to feel that their interest in me was becoming threatening, when I received interrogations that were difficult to answer—easily—interrogations about the U-rays, then I said to myself that I must put to the test all those little plans I had prepared. I abandoned my works by sea."

"Then ——"

"Oh, it was not all so simple. The story of it I will tell you some day. One thing I had not calculated upon was that my place was watched from the sea by our naval ships. They are shrewd, these people, but they are also blundering. These naval men!" His clasp on Ruxton's arm tightened. A certain scorn crept into the vibrating tones. "You know them? Your people know them. They laugh at them—your people, I mean—as I laughed. The German Navy forgets. They forget that I am the master of the submarine. They think they know it all—all that I have in here." He touched the high forehead under his soft felt hat with a lean forefinger. "But they do not. They see my boat come out. They challenge me—as they challenge me at Borga. It is the same again. I laugh and I keep on my course. I do not heave-to. Then they open their guns at me to sink me, but I only submerge. They follow on my line. I come up. They fire again, and so it goes on. They make a great commotion and waste many shells. Then comes night, and—I lose them." He shrugged. Then after a pause he went on. "Now I come to England

and I join my daughter in her home. Later on maybe I shall forget these people that have owned my body and brain, and used them for so long to outrage humanity. I never go back. Never, never!"

"No."

Ruxton shrank from the news he must convey. The doubt in his monosyllable, however, did not pass the other by. The Pole's big eyes turned full upon his companion's face, and enquiry rang in his echo of the monosyllable.

"No?"

"You cannot go to your daughter's place. Von Salzinger has discovered it. It will be watched."

"Ah!"

"It is an added reason for my meeting you."

"It is an added complication. So, so."

"But not beyond—straightening out."

"No?"

"My father is awaiting you. There is Dorby."

They walked on in silence. The old man moved with surprising vigor. He was thinking rapidly. The new situation involved a readjustment of plans. He was seeking solution with a fertility of imagination which might have astonished the Englishman had he known.

Ruxton went on.

"Our works are under protection from our naval authority. They should be safe. My father thinks the shelter of our home should serve for the present."

Von Hertzwohl seemed to pass the offer by, dwelling only upon the safety of the works.

"That is good, the works protected," he said abruptly, his luminous eyes shining. "You are clever. You take no chance. And the work? It goes on? Good! Ah! I must see it all." He rubbed his hands. "There is no hitch? Nothing? The vessels grow—grow while you look. Ah, yes, I know you British. There will be no more submarine danger; no more massacre of women and children at sea. It gives me the greatest joy."

The old man's enthusiasm was beyond all thought of self. It was so simple, so intense. It was the enthusiasm of a child for his new toy, and Ruxton marvelled at the odd mixture which went to make up his strange character.

"The completion of the work is as inevitable as that your Government means to—hunt you down."

Ruxton thought to impress the Pole with the precariousness of his position. But the man brushed it aside.

"Ach!" he cried, with a gesture of recklessness. "Yes, they hunt me down. That is it. That is why I do not burden your father with my safeguard. It is good to think of. This generous man—your father. It is good that his son comes to—help me. I feel it all here." He pressed one hand over his heart. "But no. I know these people. I do not fear them. They hunt me down. They kill me. It is not so much. It is so small a thing I do not think of it. No. But they do not hunt me down," he went on, with a smile of quiet confidence. "I will go with you to Dorby. I will talk with your great father—and then—I go. It will be good to befool them—and I will befool them."

He laughed a fearless, heart-whole laugh which left the younger man marvelling.

CHAPTER XIX

THE TIGER SPRINGS

THE drawing-room at Redwithy Farm was bathed in the shadows of early autumn evening. A fire of blazing logs spluttered and crackled in the great open fireplace. Its ruddy light shed an atmosphere of mellow comfort and coziness over the entire aspect of the room. Under ordinary circumstances Vita would have revelled in the delight of these moments of a great new happiness in her beautiful home.

She was ensconced in an armchair beside the fire which had doubtless, in years gone by, supported the slumbering form of some bewigged country squire. Its design was perfect for such a purpose. A small tea-table stood at her elbow. The muffins were cold upon it, but she had been glad of the mildly stimulating effects of the tea.

Now she was sitting forward in her chair gazing deep down into the heart of the fire. A teeming thought was speeding through a brain which, of late, seemed always to be working at high pressure. The odd pucker of thought between her brows added charm and character to her beautiful face. Her eyes, too, had lost something of their profound serenity. They were alight and shining with a certain nervous concentration, while her delicate lips were unusually firmly compressed.

She had only returned from London an hour earlier, and now, far from the distractions of the momentous hours she had spent with the man whose love had been powerful enough to sweep aside every other consideration from her mind, she was striving to quell all emotion, and disentangle the skeins in which she felt hopelessly caught up.

Paramount, her great love for Ruxton stood out and tripped her at every effort to concentrate upon those matters which related to the plans upon which they were all at work. Her alarm for her father was real and almost overwhelming. But her joy in her new-found love robbed it of half its significance. In the happiness of the moment it was impossible to believe or accept, even, the suggestion that disaster had overtaken, or could overtake him.

In the first rush of her dread Ruxton's confidence had reassured her. Her father must be safe. Her lover's argument had been so clear and convincing. Then he had promised to meet him on his arrival in England. Yes, her father was bound to make for Dorby. That was their secret landing-place. Ruxton would be there. He would not fail. He would warn him of Von Salzinger's discovery of her house. He would arrange for his safety. To all these things he had given his word, and his word was all-sufficient for her. As for his ability to put his promise into effect there could be no question. The proud thought in her was supreme.

She dwelt upon the glamored picture of her lover which was always in her mind, and it comforted her and reassured her as she had never found comfort or reassurance before. No one who knew him could question, she felt. Her vivid mental vision dwelt upon the sculptured beauties of his magnificent face and head. The calmly assured manner; the great physical strength, which reminded her of the men in the wonderful history of her own country,—these things overbore her woman's timidities, and reacted upon her in a manner which drove all doubts headlong.

He would write her. How? Through the post, or would he send a messenger with the news of her father's safety? It was a useless speculation. All she knew was that the news would come. He had promised it.

Vassilitz entered the room. Vita knew it because the door had opened, and the rattle of the handle had disturbed her. Otherwise the man's movements were decorously silent. He crossed to the windows and drew the curtains. He glided across the room, and prepared to remove the tea-things.

Would madame have the lights? No, madame preferred the firelight. The brighter lights would have disturbed her dreaming. The man bore the tea-table away, his dark eyes and sallow features perfect in their immobility.

As the door closed behind him, memory brought Vita a fleeting unease. She remembered Ruxton's warning about Vassilitz. He had suggested his possible connection with the Secret Service. It seemed impossible. And yet Ruxton had been definite. How long had she known him? She cast back in her mind. Why, as long as she could remember. She remembered him as a village lout, who sometimes worked for her father in his garden. Then he had been taken away to the army, as they were all taken away by the cruel conscript laws. Yes, of course, he had been away in the army, and—they had lost sight of him all that time—the time he was in the army.

Then she dismissed the matter. Ruxton must be right. She was sure he would not say such a thing without some reason. She would send Vassilitz back to his home. There must be no unnecessary risk of her father's safety.

Having settled the matter, the fiery caverns in the grate absorbed her attention once more, and every beat of her heart helped to bridge the distance which separated her from the lover who had so suddenly thrust himself into her life.

How long she sat crouching over the crackling fire, dreaming those dreams of life, which afterwards become the most sacred treasures of a woman's memory, Vita never knew. Later, when she reviewed those moments, conviction remained that never for one moment had her eyes closed in response to the seductive warmth of the fire. Yet she knew that in some strange manner oblivion must have stolen upon her. Without a shadow of warning she found herself sitting bolt upright, every drop of blood seeming to have receded from her veins, leaving her shivering in a frigid panic. The cold, hard tones of a man's voice were addressing her.

"The Princess will forgive the unceremonious nature of this visit," it said. "It is imperative, for—it is made under the direct authority of those who claim all subjects of the Fatherland."

The words were in German. They were without a shadow of inflection, and thereby gained in the consummate tyranny of their meaning.

Vita was on her feet. Nor had the wild panic which swept through her every nerve centre power to rob her of the regal poise natural to her. She battled fiercely for calmness, but only achieved it superficially.

In the dark of the room she could see nothing of the intruder distinctly. A shadowy outline in the direction of the closed door was all she could make out. Then, with a swift movement, one arm was thrust out towards the wall beside the fireplace. Her fingers encountered a group of electric switches. In a moment the room was flooded with a shaded, mellow light.

"Frederick von Berger! You!"

It was the only exclamation that escaped her parched lips. But it expressed all the terror which would no longer be denied.

She had recognized the intruder. And behind him she saw the square figure of Von Salzinger. But the latter meant nothing compared with the overwhelming personality of the man whom she, with thousands of others, had always regarded as the Kaiser's evil genius. Probably only once or twice in all her years she had seen this man in the flesh. But his pictures, they were known to everybody in the Fatherland, just as was the sinister reputation which dogged his name.

Oh, yes, she knew him—and he was here, here in England, and had stolen in upon the privacy and obscurity of her home. What was his purpose? What? Something of it, at least, was plain to her from the moment of her recognition. It was the cruel hand of the Teutonic machinery reaching out towards her and—hers. Hers! The thought seared itself upon her brain. For herself she had no thought, but for her father she had become the veriest coward.

The intruder displayed no interest or feeling at the manner of Vita's greeting. The lines of his face remained as stonily graven as chiselled marble. So cold was his regard that it even seemed incapable of interpreting her matchless beauty.

"I am honored that the Princess recognizes me," he said, with a coldness that made his words an offence. "It will save explanation."

Then he came towards her and stood before the fire confronting her. His height matched hers, which left him only of medium height for a man.

"Your father has sold the secrets of Borga to—England. Now he has made good his escape to—England." Then without a sign, or gesture, or shadow of significance, he added: "So you see it was necessary to visit you here."

It was well-nigh an impossibility ever to fathom the thought which lay behind this man's spoken word. There was a directness and simplicity about him which was utterly confounding. Then there was that dreadful frigidity of eye and attitude.

Vita realized the impossibility at once. She made no attempt to guess at that which was in his mind. She contented herself with his admission of her father's escape. Without it terror alone would have remained. Instead, now, a wonderful calmness settled upon her. Maybe there was a touch of desperation in her calm. But there was still the assurance of her father's security, at least temporarily. She must watch. She must strive. If there were the smallest possibility she must baffle the purpose which had brought Frederick von Berger to her home. She waited.

"It is not presumed, of course, that you are aware of these matters—yet. But it is well known to our agents that you are in touch with the Prince. Therefore it is probable on his arrival in England he will communicate with you. It is not our intention to permit you to thus incriminate yourself. All possibility of the Prince's communicating with you must be avoided, or you, a woman, will fall under the penalty of his crimes. You will prepare yourself at once to make a journey by road. You will leave this house at once, and remain away from it until the whole unpleasant affair has been settled to the satisfaction of Berlin. These are instructions direct to you from the authority of the land which still claims you subject."

Resentment was the dominant emotion the man's pronouncement stirred in Vita. His authority was unquestioned in her mind, but the manner of him was infuriating to her hot Polish blood. The sparkle of her beautiful eyes could not be concealed. She bit her lips to keep back the hot words which leapt in retort, and, all the while he was speaking, she reminded herself of the necessity for calm. The moment his last word died out her reply came.

"Here, in England, I am commanded by German authority to abandon my home and go whithersoever it pleases you to conduct me. German authority in a country where German authority does not obtain. You trespass on my premises, admitted I do not know how. You dictate this absurd order to me, and expect me to obey it. This is not Prussia."

"Precisely, Princess. If this were Prussia there would be no discussion." It was the first shadow of threat the man had displayed. It was not in his tone. It lay in the keen, steely cold gleam of his eyes. "As for the authority," the man shrugged, "there is no corner in the world where a German subject exists that German authority does not obtain—for the German subject. If you have not yet realized this, then I beg you to do so at once. The method of enforcing that authority alone differs."

"I understand that. In England it is enforced by the methods such as any common criminal might adopt. For instance, the burglar who steals into private houses."

The biting sarcasm left Frederick von Berger quite undisturbed.

"The chief point is, it is, and will be, enforced," he observed coolly. "Will you be kind enough to prepare for that journey?"

"If I refuse?"

Von Berger shrugged.

"You will still make it. The preparations will be made for you."

"By whom?"

"By your servants."

There was just the faintest flicker of the eyelids as the man assured her. There was no smile, and yet there was a change from the frigidity which had been so poignantly marked up to that moment.

"My servants! Are they, too, bound to obey the mandates of Berlin in violation of the laws of free England?" Anger was getting the better of her resolve.

"They, too, are children of the Fatherland."

"Spies!"

The exclamation broke from the angry woman with fierce heat.

"Certain of them have their orders."

They stood eye to eye. The anger of the Princess flamed into the cold gaze of the man. There was no yielding in either at the moment.

"I refuse."

The words came full of desperate determination. But even as Vita pronounced them she felt their futility. Swiftly she cast about in her mind for a loophole of escape, but every avenue seemed to be closed. The house was isolated. It was attended by seven or eight servants, and bitterly she remembered that they all came from a country which yielded allegiance to Teutonic tyranny. Ruxton had been right. Oh, how right! Which of these servants were under the orders of this man? She could not be sure, excepting in the case of Vassilitz. Again panic grew and reached a pitch of hysteria as she listened to the man's easy level tones.

"You are angry, and your common-sense is blinded by it," he said without emotion. "Were it not so you would see the absurdity of your refusal. I am not without means of enforcing authority. Listen. At the front door stands a powerful car. A closed car, which is fictitiously numbered. While we are talking your maid is packing for you. She has orders to prepare for you every luxury and comfort you are accustomed to require. This luggage will be placed in the car, and she will travel with you. If you persist in your refusal you will be dealt with. If you seek to call for aid you will be silenced. The servants in your house will not dare to raise a finger in your assistance. You will be conducted to a place already prepared to receive you. You will be treated with every courtesy your rank and sex entitles you to. And when these affairs are settled to suit Berlin you will be released. Do you still refuse?"

The recital of the conditions prevailing possessed a conviction that suggested the inevitability of Doom. Vita realized. Coming from another than Frederick von Berger she might have hoped. But this man—she shivered. A conscienceless mechanism as soulless as cold steel.

Her answer was delayed. Her eyes, searching vainly, swept over the room. Finally they encountered the square face of Von Salzinger. She had forgotten him. Her gaze was caught and held, and, in a moment, she realized that he was endeavoring to convey some meaning to her. Its nature was obscure, but the expression of his usually hard face suggested sympathy, and almost kindliness. Could it be that in the grinding machinery of Prussian tyranny she possessed one friend? She remembered Von Salzinger's protestations. She remembered that he had spoken of love to her. Love—what a mockery! But might she not hope for support from him? No, he was bound hand and foot. She dared hope for no open support. But ——

Von Berger displayed the first sign of impatience. He withdrew his watch.

"I cannot delay," he said. "It is not my desire to use the force at my command. Being in England, and you being a woman, discussion has been permitted. You will now choose definitely, within one minute, whether you will submit to the orders of Berlin, or resist them. I am considering your convenience. It is immaterial to me which course you adopt."

He held the watch in the palm of his hand, and his eyes were bent upon its face, marking the progress of the second hand. The influence of his attitude was tremendous. He was a perfect master of the methods which he represented. No one could have observed him and failed to realize that here was a man who, with the same extraordinary callousness, could easily have stepped to the side of a fainting woman, and, without a qualm, have placed the muzzle of a revolver to her temple and blown her brains out, as had been done in Belgium.

Vita watched him, fascinated and terrified. The silent moments slipped away with the inevitability which no human power can stay.

Von Berger looked up. The measure of his eyes was coldly calculating.

"You have ten seconds," he said, and returned to his contemplation of the moving hand.

The strain was unendurable. Vita felt that she must scream. Her will was yielding before the moral terror this man inspired. There was no hope of help. No hope anywhere. The fire shook down, and she started, her nerves on edge. She glanced over at Von Salzinger. Instantly his features stirred to that meaning expression of sympathy. Now, however, it only revolted her, and, as though drawn by a magnet, her eyes came back to the bent head of Von Berger.

Simultaneously the man looked up and snapped his watch, closed and returned it to his pocket.

"Well?" he demanded, and the whole expression of him had changed.

Vita saw the tigerish light suddenly leap into his eyes The man was transfigured. She warned herself he was no longer a man. She could only regard him as something in the nature of a human tiger.

"I will go," she said, in a voice rendered thick by her terror-parched throat.

"Ja wohl!"

Von Berger turned and signed to his confederate.

CHAPTER XX

BAR-LEIGHTON

THE face that gazed out at the driving October rain was one whose expression of unrelieved misery and hopelessness might well have melted a heart of flint. The wide, grey eyes had lost their languorous melting delight, which had been replaced by one of driven desperation. Dark, unhealthy rings had sunk their way into the young surrounding flesh. They were the rings of sleeplessness, and an ominous indication of the mental attitude behind them. The oval of the cheeks had become pinched and pale, while the drooping lips added a pathos that must have been irresistible to a heart of human feeling.

Vita was a prisoner in the hands of men without scruple or mercy. At least one of them she knew could claim all and more than such words expressed. Of the other she was less convinced. In fact, it was the thought that he was, perhaps, simply under the control of the other which, she told herself, made sanity possible. But even so it was the vaguest, wildest hope, and only in the nature of a straw to which to cling in her desperation.

The window from which she looked out gave upon a wildly desolate scene. She was down deep, almost in the bowels of the earth, she admitted, and the rugged sides of the chasm, clad in a garment of dark conifers and leafless branches, rose up abruptly in every direction her window permitted her gaze to wander.

She had no understanding of where she was. The journey had been long. It had been swift, too, under the skillful driving of Frederick von Berger, beside whom Von Salzinger had travelled. She had a vague understanding that the moon had been shining somewhere behind the car most of the time. Therefore she had decided they were travelling westwards. Then had come the dawn which had found them racing across a wide and desolate moorland, in a gale of wind and a deluge of driving rain, with dense mist clouds filling to overflowing sharp and narrow hollows which dropped away from the high level like bottomless pits of mystery and dread.

There had been nobody inside the car to question but her maid, Francella, and Vita had steadfastly denied herself any form of intercourse with the woman, under the certainty that she formed part of the Secret Service with which all unknowingly she had been surrounded.

Then had come a moment when her straining eyes, striving to penetrate the rain-streaming windows, had detected a distant view of a stretch of water. She had not been certain at first. But later she had detected the hazy outline of a steamboat upon it, with a long streaming smoke-line lying behind it. So she made up her mind it was the sea.

Even this, however, gave her no real cue to her whereabouts. For a moment she thought of Dartmoor, but later on she believed that that desolate wilderness was well inland.

Later again, all speculation had been yielded up under the painful interest of the moment. They were driving along the edge of a deep, mist-laden ravine. Vita had gazed down upon it in awed contemplation. It was narrow and precipitous. Then had happened something which made her shiver and clutch at the sides of the car. The driver had swung round a fierce hairpin bend in the road. The next moment the downward incline made her seek support lest she should slide from her seat. In a moment the car was swallowed up in the dense white fog of the ravine.

So she had come to her prison, which she learned accidentally was called Bar-Leighton. Whether the name applied to the house or to the locality she never knew. It was a big rambling mansion, deep hidden in a close surrounding of trees, nor, as far as Vita could see, was the ravine occupied by any other habitation.

This was the second day of her imprisonment. It had been raining when she arrived. It was still raining. It looked as if it were likely to continue raining for a month. Vita had spent most of her time gazing out of the window. She was heart-broken and desperate.

She had no eyes for anything but the cheerless view beyond the window. Its attraction was small enough in its repellent austerity, but it represented freedom. It represented the life which was forbidden her. Somewhere out there beyond, miles and miles away, was the love of her life, maybe vainly seeking her. Somewhere out there all that made for her happiness in life lay beyond her reach. Would she ever recover it? Would she ever listen to those calm tones of encouragement, and purpose, and love again? It seemed impossible. It seemed as though the end of all things was about to be achieved for her, now that the savage hand of Prussian tyranny had been laid upon her.

The treatment meted out to her had been by no means hard so far. She occupied a suite of apartments unusually handsome and spacious. But they led from one into the other, and all the outer doors were securely locked. She had been handed over to a hard-faced matron of German nationality on her arrival, nor, from that moment, had she been permitted sight of either of her male captors.

It was this dreadful isolation, this suspense, which affected her. Was she to remain here indefinitely, ignorant of her father's movements, of all that might be happening to her lover, of the possible disaster to all those plans to which she had so completely lent herself? The thought was maddening. It was completely unbearable. She wanted to weep, to scream. But she did neither. She sat on in a window-seat in the splendid sitting-room, and gazed miserably out on the depressing aspect which thrust her lower and lower in the deeps of despair.

If Vita had been permitted no further sight of her captors it was not because they had taken their departure from the precincts of the prison they had prepared for her. On the contrary. With the arrival of Prince von Berger at this retreat, hidden so deeply in the remoteness of some of the wildest of the west country, the place became a hive of secret activity. Many visitors came and went, but mostly at night. And so contrived were their movements, that never for one moment did the mansion lose its appearance of neglect in the hands of an indifferent caretaker.

Amongst those who visited the place at night was Johann Stryj, and with him a man named Emile Heuferman. It was a far cry from Dorby to Bar-Leighton, but distance seemed to have no concern for these people, who were served by cars of great speed and power. It was obvious that Frederick von Berger's visit to England had been the cue for great activity in the underworld of the Secret Service, and that far-reaching powers were in his control.

While Vita watched the desolation of rain-washed woodlands, Von Berger was occupied with Johann Stryj and Heuferman in a library, which had obviously once been the pride of a previous owner of the house. Von Salzinger was in attendance, too, and, for more than two hours, it was pretty evident these four had been in close consultation on matters of vital interest.

It was obvious, too, that Heuferman was of lesser degree than his companion, Stryj, for it was to the latter Von Berger chiefly addressed himself and from whom he extracted the information he needed. All the talk was of Dorby, and during it the name of Farlow frequently mixed itself into the details. The manner of these men was devoid of all heat. Von Berger might have been a machine, so frigidly precise was his whole attitude. Johann Stryj spoke only the words necessary, with an effect and decision which must have left nothing to be desired by his exalted superior. Von Salzinger was reduced to a mere observer, but Heuferman became an object for the reception of explicit instructions, which, for the most part, he received with monosyllabic acquiescence.

It was in the middle of the afternoon that the meeting terminated. When Johann Stryj and his companion had taken their departure Frederick von Berger turned to the silent ex-Captain-General. His eyes were speculative. It was the cold calculation of a mind seeking to complete a half-formed train of thought.

"What were your relations with this woman—before the war?"

Von Salzinger started. A flush tinted his heavy features a sort of copper hue.

"I—don't understand, Excellency."

That odd flicker of the eyelids which seemed to be the only indication of a lighter mood accompanied Von Berger's next words.

"Yet it is not difficult. Information tells us that you at one time sought to marry her. Since coming to England you renewed your acquaintance. I desire the exact explanation. I may need to use the—relationship."

The flush had left the other's cheeks. His eyes took on a smile of meaning.

"At one time I had such thoughts. Now I have no desire to—marry her."

"Ah!"

Von Berger had faced round from the library table at which he was seated, and, crossing his legs, sat contemplatively with his elbows supported on the arms of his chair and his chin resting upon his clasped hands.

Von Salzinger stirred.

"I regard her now as one of my country's enemies. There can be no thought of marriage with one's country's enemy. Such can never receive the consideration we display towards our own womankind. In war the woman is the prize of the victor. That is real war."

The callous brutality of the man was revolting. But the other gave no sign. He contented himself with a continuance of his cold regard, and a further ejaculation.

Encouraged by this negative sign of approval Von Salzinger ventured an interrogation.

"How can my relations with her further your plans, Excellency?"

"I am not quite sure—yet." Then Von Berger bestirred himself. "It is necessary to lay hands on Von Hertzwohl—at once, and ——"

He broke off. At that moment a knock at the door interrupted him.

Von Salzinger sprang to his feet and hurried across the room. After reclosing the door he returned to Von Berger.

"Vassilitz has brought this telegram. It arrived last night at Redwithy Farm. Does your Excellency wish to speak to him?"

Von Berger took the message and opened it. It was addressed to Madame Vladimir at Redwithy Farm. The set of his features relaxed as he read the brief communication. Then he passed it across to Von Salzinger.

"Much news in a few words," was his comment.

The other perused the telegram carefully. It came from Dorby—

"All's well. Arrived safely. Returning to town. Love.—RUXTON."

"It means ——?"

"Von Hertzwohl has arrived in England. At Dorby. Also that he returns to London—Farlow, I mean, and that he is obviously the lover of the woman whom you regard as the prize of the victor. Tell Vassilitz to return to the farm without delay, to remain watchful, and to continue to act as instructed. I must interview the Princess."

Vita's painful contemplation and misery were rudely broken in upon. Just as the shadows of the dreary day were beginning to deepen prematurely the door of her sitting-room was silently thrust open, and Frederick von Berger made his unwelcome appearance.

He stood for one moment contemplating the beautiful drooping figure without the smallest sign of emotion. Then he moved forward over the polished floor, and the sound of his approach acted like an electric current upon the woman at the window. She had been caught at a disadvantage, but, in an instant, all her pride and courage rose superior to every other emotion. She sat up, and the haughty displeasure in her eyes found vent in cold words which must have stung deeply any other personality but that of their present object.

"It would be superfluous to protest at an intrusion where neither honesty, justice, nor a sense of decency exists. All I can hope for is that whatever your business may be you will complete it, and relieve me of your obnoxious presence as quickly as possible."

There was a cold scorn in the simple words which was enhanced threefold by reason of the calm with which they were delivered.

If Frederick von Berger appreciated it he gave no sign. The words might not have been spoken in so far as they deflected for a second the purpose of his coming.

He came close up to the window in which Vita was sitting. His gaze avoided her and was directed towards the gloomy prospect beyond it. His powerful figure was carried erectly, doubtless from the severity of his early military training, but it possessed a litheness quite unusual, a litheness which the angular figure of Von Salzinger completely lacked. The latent strength of the man was indomitable, and under other conditions it would have been something the woman must have admired. Now she only saw the cruelty in his hard eyes, and the absolutely cold set of the features which seemed rendered immobile thereby.

He raised one foot and rested it upon the window-seat, and, bending so that an arm rested upon his knee, he glanced down into the averted face.

"I have come to tell you that your position has somewhat changed since you became my guest here," he said, in level tones. "To my very great regret it has been discovered that you are as deeply concerned in the plot which has cost us the secrets of Borga as those others. I have received a telegram, intended for you, announcing your father's arrival in this country. The manner in which it is written conveys beyond doubt that you are perfectly intimate with all the plans of the conspiracy, and even that one of the people most concerned is your lover. So you see that changes the aspect of the matter so far as you are concerned."

"You have intercepted a message from Mr. Ruxton Farlow?"

Vita's face was no longer averted. All her woman's pride was outraged. To think that this creature's eyes should have read the lines which Ruxton had meant only for hers. She thought nothing of the significance of her own position as a result of that letter. Only was the sacrilege this man had committed apparent to her.

She believed she was dealing merely with a mechanism of Prussian tyranny. She was incapable of regarding this man as anything else. But Frederick von Berger had calculated every word he had uttered. Human nature was a lifelong study with him—even that which he could claim for his own.

"Exactly," he replied. "And the fact has made your position very precarious, very precarious indeed."

The significance of his simple statement would no longer be denied. Vita caught her breath. Her swift, upward glance in his direction had something of the alarm which he desired to witness in it.

He removed his foot from the silken cushion and stood up.

"Princess," he went on, "I came to England with very stringent orders ——"

"Who gives Frederick von Berger orders?" cried Vita impulsively. "Not even the Emperor. There is only one person who gives orders to Prince von Berger in Germany—himself. It is useless to deny it. All that you have done here—are doing—is of your own initiative."

But the man continued as though the interruption had not taken place.

"The orders I have received admit of only one course of action—the punishment by death of the traitors to my country, and the complete nullification of the effects of the plot. These things will be carried out regardless of all cost and consequence. There will be no tempering with mercy. Justice, cold justice alone will be meted out —regardless of sex."

"The question of justice I doubt. The matter of sex is a foregone conclusion. There is ample precedent for that."

The bitterness of the woman's words came from her heart. She knew that he was threatening that her life was forfeit, but the fact seemed to leave her untouched since that first swift glance of apprehension.

"The point is not one which I care to debate," the man returned, with his curious, simple directness. "It is not for me to possess an opinion on any matter where authority or the conduct of the State is concerned. I can only assure you that duty will be carried out inexorably. For you the position becomes deplorable. For you to have committed yourself to intrigues which have for their purpose the betrayal of your country is an outrage which calls for no mercy. You will have to face a penalty similar to that which awaits your father. That penalty is—death."

"Death!"

The echo came in a whisper. It was a startled whisper, as though Vita's brain were striving to grasp the full significance of the word as applied to herself. Her eyes were no longer on the man's face. They were contemplating the scene beyond the window without observing it.

Then, slowly, a change came over her. Her body seemed to draw itself erect. The scorn that had lain in her eyes a few minutes ago had given place to a curious cold calm. Her shapely lips compressed tightly, and she faced unflinchingly the man who had pronounced the sentence. Her eyes regarded him for some thoughtful moments. It almost seemed as though she were striving to probe beneath that cold mask to the thoughts and emotions which she felt must lie behind it. Then a curious smile grew in them, a smile of renewed contempt that must have been insupportable to a man of any feeling.

"And the alternative? I suppose there is an alternative. A death sentence so pronounced is generally inspired by an all-important alternative. Do you desire me to betray my friends? Do you desire me to hand my father over to execution? Do you desire me to tell you where the secrets you desire to recover are bestowed? Do you desire me to assist you to restore to your country the cruel means with which you hope to crush the heart of humanity some time in the future? Let me hear it all, the whole depth to which you desire to force me to descend. I have always wondered at the possible profundity to which the Prussian mind can descend in its lack of human understanding. Well, Prince, you had better say all you have to say now. For after this I shall claim the privilege of every condemned person to pass out of the world in peace." Then her contemptuous smile deepened. "But perhaps I am to be denied that privilege. Perhaps there is no such privilege in the Prussian code. Perhaps I am to be placed upon the rack, and tortured until I confess. I feel it would only be a fitting outcome of the Kultur to which your countrymen have risen. I am waiting to hear anything further you have to say."

It would have been impossible to tell from the man's attitude the effect of these words. Not a muscle of his features stirred. His regard remained coldly contemplative.

"There is no alternative," he said. "Your crime admits of none. We place no value upon any information you could give us. Our means are perfect for obtaining it ourselves. To prove it I can assure you of things which perhaps you do not know yourself. The plans which your friends stole are even now in the yards at

Dorby in Yorkshire. The construction of submersible vessels is going on under Admiralty supervision and protection, a matter carefully arranged by your lover, Ruxton Farlow. Your father is at Dorby, and his private submersible is moored in an inner dock at Farlow, Son and Farlow's yards. These are all facts you may be aware of, but there are others which you certainly are not. One of them is that these constructions are about to be destroyed by explosion, and the plans too. Later on there will be further developments. As for the torture you suggest, that, too, is unnecessary. I have yet to learn of a greater torture which a young, rich, and beautiful woman can endure than the thought of being torn from the arms of the hero whom she has foolishly permitted herself to worship. There can be nothing more painful to her than to contemplate in her last moments the happiness which she is denied being enjoyed by some other woman when her own penalty has been paid. My reasoning is only a man's, but —— "

"A devil's!"

Vita's calm had deserted her. Horror and loathing struggled for place in her wide shining eyes.

The man looked on unmoved.

"As you will, Princess," he said, with that curious flicker of the eyelids. "But now, since I have completed the business of my visit, I will relieve you of my obnoxious presence. When the time comes you will be given half an hour to prepare yourself for the execution of your sentence."

He moved away. The shadows of the room swallowed him up. Then, a moment later, Vita heard the door close behind him.

CHAPTER XXI

ENEMY MOVEMENTS

RUXTON'S return to town from Dorby was made by special train in the middle of the night. It had been inspired by an irresistible impulse, born of an apprehension which his great love for Vita inspired.

Prince von Hertzwohl had only sheltered one night under the roof of Dorby Towers. Sir Andrew had been urgent that he should remain his guest indefinitely, feeling that the safety of an Englishman's home was the best of all havens for this large, simple-minded Pole. But Vita's father proved something of his daughter's estimate of him. His gratitude and thanks had been sincere and cordial, but he displayed an understanding of the situation which astonished his hosts, and a decision that resisted all appeal.

"Dear friends," he had urged, "it cannot be. It is a joy to me, so great, to feel the warm shelter of your perfect English home. I love the parks, the wide moor, the white cliffs. But I love more than all the generosity and kindliness of your friendship. But you do not yet grasp what all this means. These people will have my life, and your locks and bars will be no obstacle to their Secret Service. They will get me here, as they would get me in their own country. Nor can we say what danger I might not expose you to. No, my course is quite simple. I will show you to-night."

Father and son were reluctantly forced to acquiesce.

That night, after dinner, the shrewdness of Vita's father was displayed. He departed to his bedroom, and, an hour later, he reappeared in the smoking-room.

The metamorphosis was perfect. An unkempt individual, lean, dirty, and slouching, entered the room and made its way to the fire. His beard and moustache were gone, and he was clad in the greasy clothes and discolored overalls of a riverside mechanic. The disguise was so perfect that only with the greatest difficulty both father and son were able to recognize him. Later on he left the house, and set out for the town of Dorby. It was his purpose to lose himself amongst the thousands of workers who peopled the waterside, and so, while keeping in touch with Dorby Towers, completely sink his identity. Nor was it until after profound consideration that Ruxton and his father realized the wonderful but simple astuteness of the man's move.

It was the second night following this event that Ruxton's own resolve was arrived at. It was over forty-eight hours since he had dispatched his telegram to Vita telling her of her father's arrival and safety. He should have received a reply in under six hours. No reply, however, had been forthcoming.

At first Ruxton had been patient. There had been much to occupy him of an important nature at the shipyards. He had had little time to think of anything else. The constructions were steadily growing under the energetic hands of his engineers and marine architects. Already the promise of the future was taking definite shape. The work, pressed on at his urging, was proceeding apace. Already the completed outlines of two of the hulls filled twin slipways. His enthusiasm was growing with the rapidity of a man of keen imagination. His dreams were becoming real, tangible. The experiment was full of a promise which weeks ago had no place in his almost despairing regard of the future.

But at night there was less occupation for his mind, and inevitably his thoughts flew at once to the woman who had opened out to him the radiant possibilities of his future. No reply had reached him on that first night, and unease began to make itself felt. He mentioned the matter to his father with marked unconcern. The shrewd Yorkshire eyes which regarded him were blandly uncurious.

"Did you word it for reply?" he enquired, glancing up from the pictorial periodical he was looking at.

Ruxton had not worded it particularly so, he assured him, with a glance of trouble in his dark eyes.

Then the old man went on with his paper.

"I shouldn't worry about it," he said calmly. "It must have been delivered, or it would have been returned to you."

But the assurance was without effect upon the lover. He said no more then, but at dinner the following evening his anxiety would no longer be denied.

The butler had withdrawn. Ruxton had been unusually disinclined to talk during the meal. The keen brain of his father had summed up the reason to a fraction, but, with quiet understanding, he had waited for the unburdening which he knew would soon come.

It came as Ruxton, ignoring the dessert, sat back in his chair and lit a cigar.

"I've ordered a special train for town, Dad; I can't stand the suspense any longer."

"You mean—the answer to your message." Sir Andrew made no attempt to misunderstand him. "But where is the suspense? It was a message of—his arrival, I understand. The answer was optional."

"Optional? Ah, you don't understand." Just for a moment the trouble seemed to pass out of the younger man's eyes. He was contemplating the wonderful love which had come to him. He breathed a deep sigh. "Look here, Dad, what would you have felt like—you know, say just before you married my mother, if you sent her an urgent message by wire and received no reply? Why, in the past twenty-four hours you'd have been driving in a stage coach, or something equally slow, to find out the reason, if I know anything. There are a dozen things I could have done. I could have kept the wires humming incessantly—but for possibilities. Those possibilities have restrained me. But now I can wait no longer. I must see Vita myself and assure myself that nothing is—wrong. Dad, it's the whole world to me. I can't wait any longer. I love her, and I am going to marry her. That's where the suspense lies."

"That's how I supposed," Sir Andrew nodded, his shrewd eyes twinkling. "One has to endure many anxious moments under such circumstances. I have known them myself. You leave at ——"

"Three A. M."

The old man nodded.

"I've not met her yet, boy," he said kindly, "though," he added slyly, "I seem as if I did know her. You see, you've spoken of her a lot. Well, if she's half the woman you have told me she is, I congratulate you heartily. Somehow, boy, I feel sure she is. Yes, it is as well to go—with possibilities hanging over us all."

He rose from the table and held out his hand as Ruxton followed his example.

"The very best of luck, boy, and—will you give her my love? You can leave the work here in my hands."

The two men clasped hands with a vigor such as belonged to two strong natures, and then, as they moved off to the library, they fell to discussing those "possibilities" to which Ruxton had alluded.

Ruxton's anxiety was no mere impatience of a hot-headed lover. He had not permitted his imagination to distort things out of a real proportion. He knew that their Teutonic enemies were able to lay hands upon Vita if they decided upon such a course. And all too late he had realized that his message had been an indiscretion. Once having arrived at this realization, the rest followed in painful sequence. If his message, though carefully worded, had fallen into enemy hands, the possibilities such an event opened up were illimitable.

It was between ten and eleven in the morning that he presented himself at the flat in Kensington.

On his way up the stairs he received his first shock. It was no less than an encounter with Mrs. Jenkins on her way down them, garbed in her long outdoor ulster, such as all women of her class seem to possess, bearing under one arm an ominous-looking bundle.

He stopped her, or rather she provoked attention herself by a dry cough and a prolonged, moist sniff.

"You goin' up to 'er flat?" she demanded; "'cos if you are she ain't in."

There was a sort of defiant displeasure in her words that, to Ruxton, might have been just her natural form of address, or might not have been.

He paused, glanced down at her bundle, and finally regarded her severely.

"Where are you going?" he demanded.

"Don't see it's your bizness. Any'ow I'm goin' to do a bit o' shoppin'."

Then Ruxton adopted a high hand.

"Well, just come back up-stairs a minute. Your shopping will keep. I want to speak to you on a matter of importance. Come along."

He moved on up the stairs, and Mrs. Jenkins, used to obeying somebody at all times, followed him protestingly.

"I don't see I got no right any'ow. But wot with her bein' away, and stoppin' away, and me 'avin' no food to eat, as you might say, an' my wages overdue, an' the bills unpaid, I don't know, I'm sure. Maybe you got my wages with you, bein' a friend of 'ers?"

But Ruxton offered no explanation until they reached the flat and the door of it was securely shut behind them. Then he turned upon her with a forcefulness that reduced her to the necessary condition for giving all the information he needed with the least superfluous verbiage.

"Look here, Mrs. Jenkins, I just want a few straight answers to a few plain questions. Remember, the matters I'm going to question you on are of vital importance —very vital importance. I just want plain truth and nothing else."

"Truth! You'll say I'm lyin' next. Wot d'yer want to know? My motter is allus tell the truth an' shame the devil."

"Yes, yes, that's all right. Where's your mistress?"

The woman sniffed, while she eyed him distrustfully.

"Dunno. Ain't see 'er since you was 'ere last."

"When did you expect her?"

"Why, next day, o' course. She allus come 'ere every day 'less she sed. 'Sides, my wages was due next day, an' there's the 'ousekeepin' money. I ain't got neither. I writ 'er to 'er home, but ain't 'ad no answer. I got to eat, an' I ain't got nothin' t' eat in the place, so I was just goin' to slip round with a pair o' blankets an' get a loan. Y' see I didn't know wot to do, an' I tho't ——" She broke off with a fresh sniff.

Ruxton produced some money and handed her two sovereigns.

"There, that'll keep you going. Now all I want from you are these facts. You haven't seen her since I was here, and you expected her next day. You wrote to her and received no reply. The last time you saw her she was leaving for her—home. That so?"

The woman nodded and sniffed.

"Yes, sir." The gold had impressed her.

"Very well. Now I want you to keep on here as if nothing had happened. You shall have your money regularly. Look after your mistress's things carefully, and if any one calls here, any visitors, men, or—or strangers, let me know. There, that card will give you my address. If I'm not there my secretary will take any message for me. I'm afraid some accident must have happened to your mistress. I am going to find out with the help of the—police. Do you understand? Whatever you do, don't talk."

By the time he had finished the poor woman was thoroughly alarmed, and showed it.

"My, sir, I do 'ope nothin' 'as 'appened serious-like. She was allus a venturesome one, as you might say, goin' about, an' I allus was a-tellin' of 'er ——"

"Yes, yes; that's all right. The thing is, I've got to find out. Now, you see and do as I have said, and your mistress will thank you. Nor shall I forget. Remember, if any one calls for her, get their names and remember their faces, and—don't talk."

He hurried away, and passed down the uninviting stairs at a run. Two minutes later he was in a taxi, driving at a breakneck speed for Smith Square.

Arrived there, he ordered his own car, and, while awaiting its arrival, gave a string of instructions to Heathcote. Within another twenty minutes he was in his car, threading his way through the London traffic with the reckless inconsequence only to be found in an ex-naval chauffeur urged by an equally reckless employer.

A nightmare of apprehension pursued Ruxton over the switchback Oxford road. With a mind clear and incisive he had thought at almost electric speed, and planned the course to be pursued. In his brief twenty minutes with his secretary he had carefully detailed all his requirements. Now he could only lie back in his car, while the sailorman, driving him, obeyed the reckless instincts which have made him and his comrades a byword for devotion. Ruxton demanded speed, and the keen-eyed chauffeur gave it him. Heavy car as it was, it danced over the greater part of the journey with the fantastic and dangerous irresponsibility of a runaway. But the man at the wheel knew his machine.

The pride and joy of his life was that he was the driver of eighty horse-power. This was the first time he had ever been permitted to test the accuracy of the maker's claims.

But to Ruxton the speed was a snail gait, and it seemed to him, on that brief journey to Wednesford, that he lived through centuries of despairing anxiety and doubts. Had these devils got at Vita? The burden of his cry was based on all the experiences of the late war. Yet what could they do? What would they dare do, here in England? He tried to reassure himself. But it was a vain attempt. He knew, only too well, the ruthless audacity of these people. Then he blamed himself that he had not insisted that Vita should have abandoned her home in Buckinghamshire when she first told him of Von Salzinger's visit. Was not that sufficient warning for any sane mind? Did it not clearly prove that Vita was watched? And, if she were watched, did it not point the purpose in the Teutonic mind to act if it suited it? Of course it did. He was to blame, seriously to blame—if anything had happened to her. He remembered Vassilitz and the inspiration his doings had awakened in him. He must have been mad not to think further—mad or incompetent.

So his feverish imagination ran on and tortured him as no other anxiety could have tortured him. And then came the relief of further action.

He reached Wednesford all too soon for his sailorman, who would have infinitely preferred continuing his reckless journey to Land's End and then—back again. However, he removed his foot from the accelerator and drew up at the police-station of the little old market town in a perfectly decorous fashion. The local chief was awaiting the car, and Ruxton was conducted promptly to that officer's private room.

The chief superintendent was a florid-faced, bulldog-looking man of about forty, vigorous, alert, but possessing no outward sign of particular mentality. He was all deference for his visitor.

"I received the telephone message, sir," he said at once, "and acted upon it. I sent a plain-clothes man out to Redwithy with instructions to ascertain if Madame Vladimir was at her residence, and, if not, to ascertain if possible something of her recent movements. The man should return now at any moment." He pulled out his watch and made a rough calculation. "Yes, he is quite due now. Would you care to give me more intimate particulars?"

To find himself dealing with a Cabinet Minister in matters of his own department was a little overwhelming to Chief Superintendent Reach, but he saw in it a possibility of advancement, and was ready to surpass himself in his efforts. But Ruxton saw no advantage in laying the inner details of the matter before the local police. If any such official aid were needed it would be better demanded of Scotland Yard.

"For the moment nothing more is needed than the simple local information," he replied. "On that depends all future movements. I will tell you this, however. Apart from my personal interest in the matter, there is certain political significance in it of a very important nature. More than that I cannot say until your man ——"

The whistle of the tube on the officer's desk interrupted him.

"That's our man, sir," beamed Superintendent Reach, more than satisfied at the opportuneness of the interruption. "Excuse me, sir," he added, and listened at the tube.

"Ah, yes. Send him up here at once," he called through it. Then glancing over at his visitor, he observed ungrammatically, "It's him, sir."

A moment later a brisk plain-clothes man entered the room.

"Well?" demanded his chief sharply.

"The lady's been away about three days, sir," he said, with the stolidity of a policeman giving evidence. "Couldn't tell me when she'd be back. Hadn't left any instructions about the heating apparatus for the new peach-house she is having built. The butler believed the firm who were constructing the house were to put in the plant. He said she left after tea with her maid and luggage for a journey in a motor. Not her own car. He thought it must have been one she hired from Wednesford. I have been round the garages, but no one from Redwithy has hired a car. That's why I am a bit late, sir."

The chief turned to Ruxton, who was eagerly intent upon the man's information.

"I sent him"—indicating the plain-clothes man—"as a heating expert from a well-known horticultural firm."

Ruxton nodded.

"You saw the butler—a foreigner?"

"Yes, sir."

"Did you gather an—impression from him?"

"He seemed straightforward and quite ready to talk, sir. I'm sure he knew nothing more, and seemed to believe what he said."

"There's nothing else?"

"No, sir, I think not. The place seemed all reg'lar. You see, sir, I've often 'ad to keep an eye on it when the lady's been away holiday-makin', and during the war. You see, she's a foreigner. So I know it pretty well, though it don't know me. One thing that struck me he was speaking truth was there was a tidy bunch of letters on a hall table. Might have been an accumulation."

"Letters—ah." Ruxton turned to the chief. "I think you'd better come with me and look into things. Those letters. There should be an important telegram there—if ——"

He rose from his chair with a sickening fear at his heart. The chief dismissed his subordinate and waited for Ruxton to complete his remark. But as no completion was forthcoming he attempted one himself.

"If there's been no trickery, sir."

"If she went away of her own free will—that's what we've got to find out. Come along."

Half an hour later Ruxton was addressing himself to the black-haired, sallow-faced Vassilitz, who was urbanity itself in the face of the chief of the Wednesford police.

His story was exactly the same as he had told to the plain-clothes man, and no amount of cross-examination could elicit the smallest shadow of contradiction.

Madame was frequently in the habit of going away suddenly and remaining away indefinite periods. But usually she used her own car, and rarely took her maid.

Sometimes she said when she would be back; sometimes not. On this occasion she did not. No, she was unaccompanied except for her maid, Francella, Vassilitz's own sister. And she, Francella, had given him no information. Madame was very secret in her movements. Doubtless madame would return in due course, as she had always done. He hoped no accident had happened. He was devoted to madame, whom he had known all his life.

Even the matter of letters in no way disconcerted him. They were all there on the hall table. But he appealed to the chief of police for authority to show them.

The chief assumed the responsibility, and they were produced.

They were examined carefully, and all but one telegram were duly handed back to the butler. The telegram was sequestered by the officer, but remained unopened.

There was nothing more to be gained from Vassilitz, and the car rolled away. And as they went, Ruxton, in an agony of painful conviction, gazed sombrely back at the beautiful old Elizabethan structure in its perfect setting, which was the home of the woman he loved.

He was aroused from his despairing contemplation by the voice of the officer beside him.

"There's trickery afoot, sir," he said emphatically, "and I'll lay a month's salary that black-haired Vassilitz is in it."

Ruxton turned sharply.

"What makes you so convinced?" he enquired thickly.

"Why, the letters. Every one of 'em has been opened. So has this telegram. Didn't you twig it, sir?"

Ruxton confessed his oversight, and the officer beamed pleasant satisfaction.

"That's where experience comes in, sir," he went on. "There never was a system of opening letters that couldn't be detected by those who know. I've made a study of it. Those letters have all been opened—all of 'em. What about this telegram, sir?"

"If it's mine, then the Princess has not left of her own free will. I'm afraid it's mine."

"Princess, sir?"

"Yes. She's the Princess von Hertzwohl!"

The officer's face had become a study. He was impressed more deeply than ever.

"Er—shall I open it, sir?" he hesitated.

Ruxton nodded.

"You may as well."

The man tore it open and glanced at the contents. A flush spread over his already florid cheeks.

"It's yours, sir," he said. Then he added in a low tone: "I'm—I'm sorry, sir."

For answer he suddenly felt a forceful clutch on his arm.

"The Princess has been kidnapped," cried Ruxton, in a voice deep with passionate intensity. "Do you understand? She was waiting at her house there for that message. Nothing but force would have caused her to leave it until she received that message."

Ruxton's extreme dejection on his return to town was changed abruptly into even greater alarm.

His secretary was nervously awaiting him. Nor could he restrain his impatience. Heathcote was in the hall when Ruxton's key turned in the lock. The young man held a long telegram in his hand and flourished it towards his employer the moment the door closed.

"It's from Sir Andrew," he said. "There's trouble —trouble at Dorby."

Ruxton snatched at the ominous paper and his eyes eagerly sought the boldly-written message.

"Explosion here at 6 A. M. Drawing offices completely wrecked. Serious fire. Certain departments damaged and had narrow escape complete destruction.—FARLOW."

It was the second blow in a few hours. Ruxton was hit hard. He read into the message all the ominous facts which had been left unwritten.

But in a moment he had been roused out of himself. The loss of the woman he loved had left him stunned in a curious degree. He had been attacked thereby through the sensitive organism which controlled all that belonged to the emotional side of the human heart. A terrible weight of depression had overwhelmed him for the moment. Now it was different. Here was a tangible attack. Here was something that left his heart untouched, but roused instead all the human fighting instinct which had lain dormant within him. There was no deadening apathy, there was no feeling of helplessness. He was alive, alert, and full of battle. So he prepared for a second night in succession to be spent on the railway.

"I must go to Dorby to-night," he said briefly. Then he added, as he passed up-stairs to his library: "Get on to Scotland Yard and put me through."

CHAPTER XXII

A MEANS OF ESCAPE

In the valley of Bar-Leighton the climatic pendulum had swung again. A radiant sort of Indian summer seemed to have definitely set in. Now the sun was shining, and fleecy clouds swept along the bosom of a brisk southeasterly breeze.

But the sinister genius of the place remained unchanging. It would have been optimism of a superlative order to claim that Prince von Berger ever really changed. For those in contact with him it was impossible to believe him capable of warmth or feeling. Even Ludwig von Salzinger, whose human feelings were of a grosser, baser type, regarded him as a mere mechanism, inspired by some brilliant detached evil genius. He had no love for him, contact with him depressed him, and his prevailing emotion was one of fear.

Von Berger turned from the table at which he was sitting. He passed a long document across to Von Salzinger, who was standing before the log fire crackling in the great dining-room fireplace. The Prince had read it through from beginning to end. He had read it again, and then again, so that its contents had almost been committed to memory. Von Salzinger accepted it in a silence which was the effect of his superior's example. And, still following that example, he read it through with the closest attention. Meanwhile Von Berger's dispassionate gaze was turned upon the brilliant sunlight pouring in through the wide and lofty window, which opened out upon a vista of parkland and rolling grass.

It was a written report from Johann Stryj, and it had been delivered that morning by hand.

"By the time this report reaches your Excellency the completion of our plans of destruction will have been reached. They will have been put into operation. The drawing office, where all plans and designs are locked in a strong-room, has been a simple enough matter to arrange. One of our agents works in that department. The development there is timed for 6 A. M. on the morning you will receive this. It is certain—certain as anything human can be.

"With regard to the docks and slipways there has been greater difficulty, infinitely more so, since these are under direct official control. However, we have seven agents amongst the operatives, and three of our different points of attack are under the immediate foremanship of Heuferman himself, upon whom I wish to report most favorably. The explosions here are to be synchronized with the others.

"In the case of the other matter I have a less satisfactory report to make. Our man certainly landed somewhere on the coast in this region. He was certainly traced to one night's shelter at a certain house, of whose identity your Excellency is aware. The house was penetrated and searched, but the man had taken his departure. There is a possibility he has made his way to London, and our agents there are using every endeavor to trace him. I have as yet received no report from them. My own impression, not based upon evidence, is that he is concealed in our own neighborhood. If this be so I hope later to have a good report to make on the matter to your Excellency.

"The movements of the Englishmen are simple to follow. They are both closely watched. The elder remains here attendant upon the work of construction. He is in our hands at any moment, at your Excellency's commands. The younger, too, can be dealt with effectually. He passes frequently between here and London, and at both ends, and on the journey, he is closely observed. It has now been ascertained that he is working with Scotland Yard in the interests of the woman. But on the result of this combination I have instructed the man on the spot to report himself directly to your Excellency, in accordance with your orders. I understand, however, and would call your Excellency's attention—most earnest attention—to the matter that three of our men in that neighborhood are closely shadowed by men from Scotland Yard. Consequently their services are denied us. These men can be relied on, of course, to give no information, but it points the energy behind the search for the woman and the direction of the suspicions aroused.

"My next report to your Excellency I hope will be on the result of our endeavors here.

"Your obedient servant,
"K I."

Von Salzinger raised his eyes from the paper. They encountered the profile of the Prince. He regarded it for some moments without friendliness. Then he changed his expression to one of official cordiality.

"Stryj is a capable man," he hazarded.

The reply came without a change in the direction of the Prince's gaze.

"He seems successful in the things of lesser importance. Von Hertzwohl has slipped through his fingers. He may be capable. We shall see. But we want the —body—of Von Hertzwohl. This man has made no attempt to communicate with his daughter—yet. Do you know what that means? I doubt if you do. It means that your first visit to her alarmed them. It warned the Prince, through this man Farlow, that there was danger. You, with your attempt at liaison, are responsible for that. Perhaps that will appeal to your—imagination. Herr von Salzinger, you have made two mistakes. The second is more serious than the first. If we do not secure the person of this man you will be recalled to Germany."

The calmness with which he spoke robbed his words of none of their significance. With his final pronouncement his cold eyes were turned full upon his companion, searching his gross face with a glance of inflexible resolve.

Von Salzinger's spirit was tame. But the lash and unjust condemnation goaded him.

"Discipline must be observed, Excellency," he said, with a thickness which warned the other of the effect of his words. "If I am recalled, then I must obey. But it is the authority in Berlin which is to blame for his escape. I came here to track this other, Farlow, and the work at his yards. Von Hertzwohl was still in the Baltic when I visited the Princess. There was no suggestion at the time that the Berlin authority would be sufficiently blundering to permit his escape. It would be more just to find the scapegoat amongst those who were responsible in Berlin. I submit that this matter was in your department, Excellency, of which you are the sole head."

Von Berger's reply came with a flicker of the eyelids.

"Those who are responsible for acts which jeopardize the ends of the Fatherland will reap the consequent punishment—whoever they be. No distinction will be made. That is the discipline of our country, Herr von Salzinger." Then he pointed to a chair.

The other accepted the silent order. But it was with an ill grace. Von Salzinger, for all his discipline, was no weakling. At that moment he was ready to rebel against the iron rod which Von Berger wielded. It would have required but one more sting to set the man's headstrong passions loose, whatever, in the end, it might have cost him.

But the Prince was alive to the danger signal. His understanding of human nature was something more than a study—it was an instinct. A secret purpose lay behind his charge. The value of the terror of authority upon a Prussian subject was well understood by him, and none knew better than he that rank and position afforded no emancipation from its peculiar claims. The danger signal, however, warned him that in the present case he was dealing with a man of hot passion and physical bravery. To gain full effect for his charge he must not jeopardize his purpose by risking an outbreak of passion. The effect would come after Von Salzinger's private reflection through the inborn discipline that was his.

The two men sat facing each other. The truculent regard of Von Salzinger would not be denied. But Von Berger gave no sign. He was entirely master of himself as always, just as he knew he was master of the position at the moment, and of this man.

"That which has happened to us is a greater disaster than the defeat of our armies could have been," he said slowly. "You, as well as everybody else, must realize this. If you do not you must be made to. That is why I have talked plainly. That is why you have indiscreetly permitted your anger to get the better of you. Now you must listen to me while I show you how we can achieve that which Berlin has failed to do, and which this man Stryj has failed to do. I mean lay our hands upon Prince von Hertzwohl. The woman up-stairs has been condemned to death."

"To—death?"

The square figure of Von Salzinger was erect, and his eyes were alight with a horror unusual to him. Then his feelings subsided under incredulity. "But that is a threat —merely."

Von Berger shook his head.

"It is a reality. She will die, if we do not get her father. It is part of my plan for trapping him. The news of her death will be whispered through certain channels which we know will convey it to him—wherever he be. Listen, this is the plan, and this is the work which will be assigned to you."

Half an hour later the Prince rose from his chair and crossed to the window. He stood with his back towards his companion. He had talked long and earnestly in his cold, even voice. Now he waited.

"Well?" he said at last without looking round at the still recumbent figure behind him. "That is the duty allotted to you. You accept the position?"

For answer Von Salzinger sprang to his feet. His face was purple with shame. The diabolical nature of the plan had sunk deeply into the half-savage heart of the man and found some small grains of genuine manhood there. Even he was revolted, and the habit of discipline tottered and crumpled.

"No! By God, no!" he cried, with a savage clenching of the fists.

Von Berger remained gazing out at the autumn scene.

"Think again."

But no answer was forthcoming. Von Salzinger's attitude remained, only now it seemed as if his clenching fists were a threat to the man at the window.

"Think again, Herr von Salzinger. Berlin gives no second chance."

The frigidity of the words became a threat that was insupportable. Von Salzinger was a Prussian. Self-preservation counted with him before all things. He saw every hope that had ever been his slipping from his tenacious grasp. To refuse—to refuse. He knew all it meant. He must accept or—kill this man.

His clenching fists relaxed.

"Very good, Excellency. If those are my orders I must execute them."

"Those are your orders."

Von Berger had turned about, and Von Salzinger beheld that terrible gleam in his eyes which Vita had once so painfully witnessed.

Von Salzinger spent a bad evening with himself, and a worse night.

Curiously enough this man regarded himself as not only a man of honor, but chivalrous towards women. How he arrived at the latter conclusion was one of those miracles of psychology which are beyond the understanding of the human mind. To him woman was weaker than the man whose plaything she was set on earth to become. Man's will must be her law. She possessed no rights of her own. Man's strength to enforce his will on all weaker vessels was the only right he could understand. Then woman, in the nature of things, must be intended as his plaything.

But Von Salzinger drew the line hard and fast at the limits of this understanding. Woman must be protected from physical harm and discomfort by the man whose plaything she became. As soon would he deem it right to treat ill any other of those things in life which gave him pleasure. As soon would he expect to see a child tear and rend its favorite toy. Woman must be cared for, woman must be sheltered from the buffets of life outside her own little life. She must be indulged in the feminine luxuries and pastimes. Any other course he believed would be an exhibition of brutality by no means in keeping with the boasted Kultur of his people. The moral and spiritual side of the woman was something which failed entirely to enter into his comprehension. In the moral and spiritual side of life she had no place—no place whatever.

The plan of Von Berger, and the cruel nature of the work assigned to him, had outraged all his ideas of his peculiar form of chivalry. To condemn Vita to death, and wilfully carry out the sentence, failing the success of their plans, was an unthinkable and useless cruelty which he felt he could not take part in. Brutality had here exceeded itself.

So he endured a painful and troubled night as he revolved in his mind the diabolical scheme which Von Berger had unfolded to him.

He contemplated disobedience. Yes, he contemplated defying the terrible power which Von Berger wielded so ruthlessly. But the consequence of such defiance left him panic-stricken, albeit unconvinced. He searched for a way out. But every mode of egress seemed barred to him. Every one except—— She was so very, very beautiful.

A tempting thought possessed him, and surged through the thickly flowing channels of the animal in him. The temptation grew and grew, and, with each passing hour, it more surely took possession of all that was most obstinate in him. He was yielding to it. He knew. He left Von Berger out of his calculations, he left all thoughts of the purposes of his Government out and thought only of himself, and this new temptation which dangled before his greedy eyes. Should he yield to the temptation?

His mind went back again of a sudden to the man, Von Berger, whom he knew he hated as much as he feared. It seemed so hopeless to oppose him, hopeless to oppose Berlin. Yet he felt he ought to. Then his thoughts flew again to Vita, and conjured visions of her perfect charms—and so he fell asleep.

Vita's days and nights had become one long nightmare of terror. The terror for herself had undermined all her confidence for her father, and in her lover's ability to succor. The hours of racking thought since learning the fate awaiting herself left her beautiful face drawn, and her spirit bowed and crushed. There was no hope anywhere.

From the moment she had first recognized Frederick von Berger, a dreary hopelessness had set in, and now she knew that her worst apprehensions were to be more than fulfilled. She knew something of the machiney he controlled, and she knew how hopeless it was that Ruxton, with all his manhood and confidence, could ever hope to contend with it and defeat it. Her father, she knew, would be hunted down and—punished. While she—she must inevitably fall a victim of the sentence passed upon her here in this desolate, secret prison.

The torture she endured was insupportable. Every moment of the day she was watched either by the hard-faced matron of the place, or by her own maid, Francella. She had railed at the latter for her cruel perfidy, she had appealed to the former. But in neither case had she elicited the smallest spark of sympathy.

The matron had merely shrugged her broad shoulders.

"You would sell our Fatherland to an enemy. You are not fit to live," she had said, with a coldness which none can display more effectively than a woman.

In Francella she met only the heartless cruelty of a servant who finds it in her power to rend a late mistress.

"Some day I take my children to the grave of the woman who would have betrayed our country, and I make them spit upon it."

So Vita was left to nurse her terror in the awful solitude and silence of the splendid halls of this isolated mansion.

How long she might have borne it and retained sanity is doubtful. It surely could not have been long. With the smallest gleam of sympathy it might have been possible to endure. But there was no sympathy. The gloom of her outlook from her windows, the awesome grandeur of her rooms, the cold antagonism of those who waited upon her as prison warders,—all these things aggravated her trouble, just as they were calculated to aggravate.

Then in the very depths of her despairing misery there suddenly shone out a vague, flickering light of hope. It was no less than a stealthy and secret visit from Ludwig von Salzinger. It came in the night. Vita had abandoned sleeping at night fearing lest the murder would be committed during the hours of darkness. She had allowed her imagination to run riot till she almost came to fear her own shadow.

She was sitting in an upright chair. She was gazing straight before her with eyes staring upon the door. Such was her terror of the night that she had been reduced to this impotent watching. Her thought was teeming, going over and over again every horrible fancy a distorted brain could conjure. Then suddenly, in the midst of it all, she started. Her straining eyes dilated. She leapt from her seat and sprang behind her chair, grasping its back, prepared to defend herself. The door was slowly and silently opening.

Widely ajar it stopped. The next instant a head was thrust round it, a square head with a shock of close-cut hair. The woman breathed a sigh, but remained ready to defend herself. She had recognized Ludwig von Salzinger.

The man recognized her attitude, and signed to her to remain silent. His warning had instant effect. Vita drew another sigh, and her grip upon the chair-back relaxed. With eyes wide with doubt and fear she watched the man's movements. They were stealthy and secret.

He thrust the door further open. Quickly and silently he stepped into the room. Then, with the door still ajar, he gazed back cautiously down the corridor beyond, in both directions. Having satisfied himself he closed the door with the greatest care and came towards her.

"If you speak," he whispered, "don't raise your voice, or—we shall be overheard."

"What have you come for?" demanded Vita, nevertheless obedient to his caution.

The man's brows went up and his eyes were urgent.

"Why, to get you out of this," he said quickly. "Do you think I can stand by while that devil Von Berger does you, a woman, to death? You, the woman I love—have always loved? God! I hate that man," he added, and an unmistakable ring of truth sounded in his final words. "Look here, Vita, I'm part of this diabolical machinery, I know; I can't help it; but to submit to the murder of a woman—you—God! I can't do it—if it costs me my own life. Oh, yes, I know what you'll think. You know the discipline. You know that I was forced into assisting in bringing you here, under orders I dared not disobey. I know all that, and you must think of me as you will, but I love you—madly—and I'll not consent to anything that threatens your life. I tell you, I've done with it all—all—our country. I'm going to get out of it all and flee to America, and—take you with me. You'll come with me? Say you'll come with me, and together we'll outwit this devil of a man. You've done nothing, nothing on earth to warrant the punishment he's preparing for you. Your father—that's different. But you—you—oh, it's horrible. Ach! I could kill that man when I think of it, and all he has said to me yesterday of his devil's plans."

While he was speaking it seemed to Vita that it must be some angel talking disguised in the angular, hard exterior of this Prussian. Every nerve in her body which had been so straining seemed suddenly to have relaxed. It seemed as though years of suffering had been suddenly lifted from her poor tortured brain. She recalled how from the beginning she had thought that if hope there were for her it must lie in this very Von Salzinger who had been disgraced through her father's and her agency. She gazed upon him now in wonder, and was half inclined to weep with gratitude and relief.

But she restrained herself. And quite suddenly she remembered something else. She remembered the man who claimed her love, and she remembered the love this man was now offering her. The relief of the moment changed to doubt, and, finally, to a renewed despair.

There was only one course open to her, and she adopted it frankly and without restraint. She shook her head.

"I—honor you for the sacrifice you would make, but I'm afraid it's useless. Besides, I feel it would be impossible to defeat these people. I must tell you, and by doing so I may lose forever your good-will. I do not love you. All the love I have to give has passed from my keeping ——"

"Ruxton Farlow." There was a sharp, brutal ruthlessness in the manner in which Von Salzinger broke in.

Vita shrank at the tone.

"Yes," she said. "I love Ruxton Farlow, and have pledged myself to be his wife."

"Wife?" There was a smile in the man's eyes which did not conceal his jealous passion. "What chance have you of becoming his wife? None. There is only one chance—your escape from here. Your escape from here can only be contrived by me. Am I—I going to risk my life, and all my future, to hand over the woman I love to —Ruxton Farlow? Vita, I am only a man—a mere human man. I will risk all for you. I will dare even the vengeance of Von Berger if you but promise me. But no power on earth can make me stir a hand to deliver up all I care for in the world to—Ruxton Farlow."

The frank, ruthless honesty of the man's denial was not without its appeal to Vita. She even smiled a faint, gentle smile.

"It is as I said—useless. It is only as I could have expected. I could not hope it would be otherwise. I love Ruxton Farlow."

"Whom you can never hope to see again." Again came that savage crudeness of method which Vita recognized as part of the man. Then his eyes lit with a deep, primitive passion. "Oh, yes, I must seem brutal, a devil, like that Von Berger. Maybe I am, but I can see plain sense. In less than a week you will die here, murdered. How, I can only guess at. Von Berger knows no mercy. Your father is surrounded at Dorby, and will suffer a similar fate. All your plans and schemes will be frustrated. The works at Dorby are even now destroyed. There is no power on earth that can give you to this man you say you love. Well? Is not life still sweet to you? Is not your father's escape also something to you? I tell you I can contrive these things. All I ask is that you will marry me. Your solemn pledge. I love you, and will teach you to love me and forget this Englishman. It is madness to refuse. It is your one single chance of life, and you would fling it away for a shadow, a dream which can never be realized."

There was something in the man's manner which appealed to Vita. Perhaps it was the rugged brutality of his force. The repugnance in which she had held him had lessened. To her his genuineness was unmistakable. And he was honest enough to make no claim to generosity in the course he was prepared to adopt at her bidding.

Von Salzinger saw something of the effect he had achieved upon her and resolutely thrust home the advantage.

"Vita," he said, lowering his voice still more, but losing nothing of the urgency of his manner, "I have a plan whereby I can save you both—your father and you. Think of him, that great, but misguided man, who has lavished a world of affection upon you, and to whom you are more than devoted. Can you let him die? Think how he will die under Von Berger's hands. I tell you, Vita, better endure the agony of death at the hands of a common murderer a hundred times than be left at the mercy of that man. Even the torture of the old Inquisition might be preferable. He has neither soul nor conscience. And what does it mean to achieve this safety for you both? It means the sacrifice of your love for this Englishman. God! Is it so great a sacrifice when it can never be fulfilled? A passing dream which must end in the tragedy of your murder. You say you have no love. I ask for none. That will come. I will teach you a love which this Englishman could never have inspired. And I can give you back your life, and your father's life, in the great country across the Atlantic. Every detail of my plans are complete, but it must be now or never. Do you still refuse? Do you still desire to sacrifice your father to this selfish dream which can never be fulfilled?"

The woman's eyes were yearning. A great struggle looked out of their grey depths into the passion-lit eyes of the man. The hope, oh, the hope of it all! But the price was the price of all that a woman looks forward to in life.

"Do you swear to me that my father shall be saved?" she demanded, in a low tone which thrilled to jubilance every sense in the man's body.

He flung out his arms.

"He shall leave this country with you. The fulfillment of your solemn word shall not be required of you till you are both safe across the water. If we fail—then you have sacrificed nothing. Can I say fairer? Can you doubt my honesty of purpose after that? Ach! it maddens me with alarm and impatience to see you hesitate. For you it is safety—life. For me I risk all—everything—for a wife who has no love to give me. If I fail your present lot is nothing to what mine will be. If I hate Von Berger he has no love for me, and—he is not human."

But still Vita hesitated. It was not that she doubted this man, though she knew she had little enough reason to trust him. It was the love for the man of her choice holding and claiming her. She strove to set it aside. She tried to apply reason. But it would not be denied, and it elbowed reason at every turn.

What was life without this love of hers? No, it was nothing. Would it matter if death came upon her and left her cold? No. It would even be preferable to the life of terrible regret which Von Salzinger offered her. Her father—she caught her breath. It was the one thought which her love could not thrust aside. It was in her power to save him—if she would.

The struggle went on. It shone in her eyes, it was displayed in the panting rise and fall of her bosom. The appeal of it was too great. To leave him to his fate would be the vilest selfishness. This man had promised that he should leave the country with them—before she became his wife.

She looked up. A burning excitement shone in her eyes.

"Can you communicate with my father?" she asked.

The man shook his head.

"Then how can you—save him?" she demanded sharply. "I do not know where he is, and if I did wild horses would not drag his whereabouts from me—even for the purpose of saving his life."

But her words did not offend.

"You do not trust me," returned the man, with a tolerant shake of the head. "I cannot blame you either. I must prove my sincerity—later. Meanwhile the matter is simple enough. Give me your solemn pledge that you will become my wife as soon as we safely land across the water, you, your father and me. Then I will show you."

For another few silent moments the struggle in Vita's heart went on. Now it was a struggle of doubt and credulity. All other feeling had yielded in that earlier struggle. Dare she trust this man? Dare she? But he was asking nothing until their safety had been assured. His seemed the greater risk, unless this were some diabolical plot with his superior, Von Berger. She could not reason it out. Reason was beyond her. Her father's safety lay in the balance. She forgot self for the time. So she thrust her finger upon the scale.

"I solemnly pledge myself under the conditions you name," she said in low tones.

The joy in the man's hard eyes was unmistakable, and Vita, witnessing it, understood that it was real, genuine.

"Then listen," he cried. "Communication with your father will be simple and safe. We do not need his whereabouts. I will dictate a letter to you—a letter of our plans and instructions. We will beat Von Berger at his own game, and once we are in America we can snap our fingers at the whole race. I will tell you now Von Berger threatened me yesterday again. He it was who deprived me of my command at Borga. He it was who superseded me over here. He it is who has given me the life of a cur ever since. Now I shall pay him in a way he little suspects. I will dictate this letter for you, Vita, and when it is written you will address it to your father and enclose it under cover to Sir Andrew Farlow at Dorby Towers. He will see that it reaches your father. You will see how sure is my plan. No matter into whose hands that letter falls it cannot betray his whereabouts to any one."

And Vita was finally convinced. She was making her sacrifice for the life and liberty of her father, and through all the pains and hopelessness of yielding up her love for Ruxton she had the wholly inadequate assurance that, whatever it cost her, it was her simple duty for which even Ruxton himself would never blame her.

CHAPTER XXIII

THE WRECK AT DORBY

A SMALL group of people stood surveying the wreck of one of the great construction docks in the Dorby yards. Prominent among them were Sir Andrew Farlow and his son. They were standing beside a naval officer of considerable rank. A number of naval uniforms stood out from the rest of the civilians; but these were of lesser degree.

The sky was heavily overcast. A light, penetrating drizzle of rain was falling. Somehow these things seemed to add to the sense of destruction prevailing.

The corrugated iron roof—thousands of square feet of it—was lying tumbled and torn upon a tangle of fallen steel girders. Great slabs of ferro-concrete walls loomed grey amidst the chaos. Steel stanchions of great height and strength, used to support the roofing, lay about, bent or broken, like so much lead piping. The mass of wreckage was stupendous, and through it all, and beyond it, towards the water's edge, the rigid steel ribs of twin vessels stood up defiantly, as though indifferent to the fierce upheaval which had wrecked their cradles.

Ruxton pointed at the latter.

"They've wrecked everything but what they set out to wreck."

He had voiced a general thought. There was no answer to his comment. The naval commander displayed his feelings in the almost childlike regret in his eyes. The wrecking of anything in the shape of sea craft smote him to the heart. It was no question of values to him. The sea and all that belonged to it were the precious things of life to him. Sir Andrew frowned down upon the scene. His strong Yorkshire features were sternly set.

"It means two weeks' delay. That is all." Sir Andrew's words were the outcome of his resolve.

"All of that," said the commander. "It's curious," he reflected. "It suggests inexperience or—great hurry. What of the offices?"

"You mean the drawing office?" Sir Andrew's lips set grimly as he glanced in Ruxton's direction.

"Burnt to a cinder and scattered to the four winds." Ruxton emitted a sound like a laugh deprived of all mirth.

"The drawings?" The commander's eyes were gravely enquiring.

"Not a drawing or tracing saved. Not a single working plan. Complete. Oh, yes, complete. But ——"

"But?" The concern had deepened in the officer's eyes.

Ruxton shrugged.

"We have duplicates and triplicates of everything, besides the originals. They must take us for babes or—imbeciles."

The officer was relieved. He even smiled.

"A good many do that. Well, they have told us their intentions pretty plainly. They'll get no second opportunity unless they've a staff of miracle workers. Shall you be present at the enquiry this afternoon, Sir Andrew?"

Sir Andrew signified assent. Then he asked:

"What about the inquest?"

"To-morrow morning," one of his own staff informed him.

"Four deaths. Seven injured." It was the officer again who spoke. "Two of them my men. The others operatives. One of the injured is believed to be a foreigner. If he is fit to give evidence it may be interesting."

The talk ceased. There was nothing more to be said. The wrecking was complete. No further talk could serve them.

Presently Sir Andrew moved away. His resentment outweighed his regrets. Ruxton followed him. He displayed no emotion at the ruin which had been caused. The loss of life he endeavored to thrust out of his mind. Nor was it difficult, for, in spite of the seriousness of the calamity, it was incomparable with the calamity which had come near to breaking his heart.

The officer remained where he was. His duty lay there in the work under his guardianship. He knew well enough he was not likely to escape the official verdict of "slackness."

Ruxton followed his father into the waiting car. In a moment they were threading their way through a labyrinth of unkempt buildings, all of which concealed a teeming activity and laboring life. The lanes were narrow, winding and unpaved. The car was forever crossing and recrossing the metal track of a light railway amongst strings of trucks and snorting locomotives. On every hand came the din of moving machinery. Then frequently they were held up by slow-moving horse vehicles.

The yards at Dorby were in full work. In spite of the wrecking, work went on just the same. There was no general dislocation. The phenomenon was typical of the hard-headed northern worker, and the sureness of the steady control of the great enterprise. Every unit of that great army of workers went through the daily routine with one eye upon the time-sheet, and the other upon the privileges which his union bestowed upon him. For the rest, his personal concerns only began when the steam siren sounded the completion of his day's work.

In the privacy of the offices, just within the gates of the yards, Ruxton and his father were at liberty to talk more freely. Yet for some minutes after their arrival their inclination kept them silent. Each was thinking on the lines which appealed most. Ruxton was not thinking of Dorby at all.

Sir Andrew was standing squarely upon the skin rug, with his back to the fire. More than ever he assumed the likeness to a pictorial John Bull. Even the somewhat old-fashioned morning-coat he wore added to the resemblance. Ruxton had flung himself into a large easy-chair. The room was lofty and luxurious. Nor was its fashion extremely modern. It savored of mid-Victorian days, when luxury in the office of a commercial magnate was first brought to its perfection.

The rain had increased, and, beyond the lofty windows, it was now steadily teeming. Sir Andrew was the first to speak.

"I'm trying to fathom the significance of it," he said, a little helplessly.

Ruxton's dark eyes withdrew from the window.

"Don't," he said. Then he added: "It's not worth it."

His father's shrewd eyes regarded him speculatively.

"Not worth it? How?"

"Why, because you will discover it, and it will have been trouble for nothing."

"I don't understand."

"It is simple. There is only one meaning to it. Terror."

In spite of the old man's disturbance his eyes twinkled.

"They'll achieve precious little of that. If that's all ——"

"Exactly, Dad. Purposeless destruction is a fetish of this people. Their psychology has an abnormal belief in terror. They judge everybody the same. You have seen it in a hundred ways. Except for this they are anything but fools. But in this they are almost childlike. They know they cannot stop the work in these yards. They know if they destroy a dozen sets of plans there will still be more forthcoming. They know all this, and are childishly, impotently furious. Their first thought is revenge, and then terrorizing. They think they can frighten us into abandoning the work, perhaps. I don't know. There is one thing certain: speculation on the matter is waste of your valuable efforts. Sparling is right; they have shown their hand. They will get no second chance on the same lines. They have achieved two weeks' delay. That is all they have achieved—here."

"Here?"

"Yes. I haven't had an opportunity of telling you before." Ruxton paused. A storm had gathered in his deep eyes. His fair, even brows were drawn. His father noted a sudden fullness in the veins at his temples. Then, in the midst of the affairs of the moment, he remembered his son's hurried rush to town, and its purpose.

Quite suddenly Ruxton leapt to his feet. He towered over the staunch figure of his father. His eyes had become hot and straining.

"Yes, what they have achieved here is futile. But what they have done elsewhere is—damnable," he cried, with hardly repressed fury. "I feel as if I should go mad. I've thought and thought till I can no longer think connectedly upon the matter. I am lost; utterly lost; groping like a blind man. She has gone. She's been spirited away, stolen; and God alone knows what suffering and torture she may not even now be enduring. I told you revenge and terror are the motives of these people. Their plans have fallen into our hands, and we are availing ourselves of them. Remember, the secrets we possess are the most precious of all the German Government's plans. They cannot undo that mischief, so they turn to revenge, for which they have an infinite capacity. Who are they going to be revenged upon? Us? Yes, as far as possible. Even our own lives may be threatened. But more than all they intend to hurt Von Hertzwohl and—all belonging to him. They mean to kill him, and possibly the others. But first they will use his daughter to get at him. Do you see? She will be tortured until she delivers him into their hands, and then —God knows."

He flung out his arms in a gesture of despair.

His father's eyes deepened in their anxiety. But the set of his strong mouth became firmer.

"Tell me just what has happened." The demand spoken so quietly had the effect desired.

Ruxton pulled himself together. His father watched the return of control with satisfaction.

He told the story of his journey to Wednesford calmly and quietly, without missing a detail. Sir Andrew listened closely, the seriousness of his attitude deepening with every fresh detail which pointed the certainty of foul play. At the conclusion of the story he was as gravely apprehensive as the other, and his sympathy for his boy's heart-broken condition was from the depths of his devoted heart.

"I've got the best Scotland Yard can supply working for us, and each man has been offered fabulous rewards if he can ascertain her whereabouts. So far I have no news; no hope. Dad, I love Vita so that this thing has nearly set me crazy. I tell you I must find her. I must save her from these devils, or ——"

"Have you seen Von Hertzwohl?"

Ruxton started. His drawn face and straining eyes underwent a complete change at the simple enquiry from his father.

"No. I ——"

"It seems to me if their object is to get at him it should not be impossible that a clue —— Besides, I sent a letter on to him, which came under cover addressed to me. That was the first thing this morning, just before you arrived. It was written in a woman's hand, and ——"

"God! Why didn't you speak of it before?" The demand was almost rough. Such was the rush of blind hope that suddenly surged through the younger man's heart.

The father's eyes twinkled.

"You had told me nothing. I knew nothing of the trouble."

"Of course. I'm sorry, Dad." Ruxton's whole attitude had undergone a swift change.

Now he was all eager hope, and strung to a pitch of desire for action.

"I will go to him at once."

"Now?" The old man shook his head. "You're too reckless, boy. Think it over carefully. Remember, Dorby is full of German agents. I should suggest to-night. I should suggest you adopt the garb of a worker. Ruxton Farlow visiting a working man's abode. It would be too inviting to our—enemies."

"Dad, you're right—always right. Yes; to-night. You think it was a letter from her?"

Sir Andrew shook his head.

"I haven't an idea, boy," he said in his deliberate fashion. "How could I be expected to? The letter came, and I sent it on by hand. A perfectly trustworthy hand, under cover of a fresh address to Mr. Charles Smith. Now it's different. It seems it might be a—clue."

"Might? Of course it is. There is only one woman who would write to him. But—why not have written to me?"

The same thought had simultaneously occurred to the father, and, as it came, something of the lighter manner which had been steadily gathering died out of his shrewd eyes.

It was a little yellow brick cottage, part of a terrace of a dozen or so, in a cul-de-sac, guarded at its entrance by a beer-house on one hand, and, on the other, a general shop. The brickwork was black with years of fog and soot, and the English climate. The front of it possessed three windows and a doorway, with a step that at rare intervals was tinted with a sort of yellow ochre. The windows were curtainless, and suggested years of uncleanliness in the inhabitants.

The interior was little better. The owners of the place lived down-stairs. The two small rooms above were let to lodgers of the working class. One of the latter was employed in one of the shipyards. The other the poor housewife was doubtful about. He remained unemployed, and was a foreigner; but he paid his rent, and didn't seem to require her to do any cooking for him. Then he seemed fond of her dirty-faced children, of whom there seemed to be an endless string, who frequently invaded his quarters, and submitted him to an interminable catechism of childish enquiry.

Otherwise the tall, lean workman with the hollow cheeks and luminous eyes was left to prosecute his apparently fruitless search for work unquestioned. Mrs. Clark was far too busy with her brood of offspring to concern herself with his affairs, a small mercy vouchsafed him, and for which he was duly thankful. Mr. Charles Smith by no means courted the intimacy of his neighbors, or his fellow-lodger; at the same time, he avoided exciting any suspicion.

He had received a letter that morning. He had read it at once. It was written in German, but the address upon the outer envelope was in a bold English handwriting. After reading it he straightened up his meagre room in a preoccupied fashion. His big, foreign-looking eyes were more than usually reflective, and a curious pucker of thought had drawn his shaggy brows together.

Then, as was his rule, he passed out of the house, greeting the ragged fragments of humanity, who owed—and rarely yielded—obedience to Mrs. Clark, in his friendly fashion, and set out on what appeared to be his daily pursuit of employment. He returned at noon.

He read his letter again, and sat thinking about it until he was disturbed by one of the children. Then he again set forth. Nor did he return to his abode until darkness had closed in, and the army of small children had been bestowed for the night in their various nooks and corners of the lower premises.

He lit the cheap oil lamp on his table, seated himself in the unstable old basket-chair beside his uninviting bed, and settled himself for a third perusal of his letter.

It was a long letter, and it was signed "Vita." It was written in a striking feminine hand, which moulded the spidery German characters into something unusually strong and characteristic. He displayed a mild wonder that German characters supervened the signature. But the wonder passed as he read, lost in the gravity of alarm which steadily grew in his eyes as he turned each page.

He paused during this third reading at several of the paragraphs. He reread them, as though he would penetrate the last fraction of their significance. And at each pause, at each rereading, his disquiet grew.

That letter had a grave effect upon him. So much so that he forgot time, he forgot that he had yet to go out and seek food at some ham-and-beef shop, and that he was hungry. The final paragraph of the letter perhaps affected him most of all, and gave him an unease of heart which none of the rest could have done. It was a paragraph which opened up for his scrutiny the depths of a woman's soul in the first great rush of a passionate love. He had read this with deep emotion, and a great sympathy. And as he read it he felt something of the wrong which, through him and his efforts, was being inflicted upon the woman whom it was his paternal right to cherish and protect. Then, in the last lines of this outpouring, he received the final blow which brought him a realization. It was an example of the wonderful magnanimity and self-sacrifice of a woman's love. It was the renunciation of all her hopes and yearnings in the interests of the man upon whom she had bestowed the wealth and treasure of her woman's heart.

He mechanically folded up the letter and returned it to an inner pocket. He rose with a sigh, and gazed about him uncertainly. The meaning of his sordid surroundings passed him by. His thoughts were on so many other things which filled his active faculties, leaving no room for the consideration of his own comforts. He even forgot that he had not eaten since noon. He extracted a sheet of paper from a small locked hand-grip, and set about writing a brief message—a message such as he had been asked for. He enclosed it in an envelope and addressed it to Redwithy Farm in Buckinghamshire.

He had just completed his task when the stairs outside his door creaked under a heavy footfall. The next moment there was a knock at his door.

Two minutes later Ruxton Farlow, clad in workman's clothes, occupied the protesting wicker-chair, while Prince von Hertzwohl contented himself with a seat upon the unyielding bed. The oil lamp shone dully upon the table and threw into dim relief two faces, whose strength and suggestion of mentality suited ill the quality of the clothes which covered the bodies beneath them.

To Von Hertzwohl it was as though some miracle of a none too pleasant nature had been performed. In view of his letter from Vita, Ruxton Farlow was the last person he desired to see. On the other hand, he had been waiting anxiously to hear from him, or see him on the subject of the happenings at the yards, of which the whole town of Dorby had become aware.

Ruxton had his own purpose in view, but the Prince gave him no opportunity of developing it at the first excitement of the meeting.

"Tell me, Mr. Farlow. Tell me of it all," he cried, in his swift, impulsive way. "I have heard so much and know so little. I have lived through a fever since yesterday morning. I have listened to the wildest stories of conspiracies and plots. It is said, even, that your father's offices have been destroyed; that he has been injured. But I knew that was not right. You will tell me it all."

Ruxton was reluctantly forced to abandon his own purpose for the moment. He even smiled in answer to the old man's wide, eager eyes.

"They have started on us," he said, with quiet confidence. "Oh, yes, they have started. The purpose was well intentioned, but of childish inception and indifferent execution. They have delayed work for perhaps two weeks. They have become obsessed with the use of bombs, which was a disease during the war."

"But the explosions—they were terrific. I heard them here, in this bed."

"The German race can do nothing without bluster, and they seem to regard bluster as achievement. They destroyed the slipways of two of the new submersibles, with little damage to the vessels themselves. They have destroyed an office, and the working-plans therein. We have many others, and your originals are safely disposed. It is nothing. It is scarcely worth discussing."

The old man shook his head—that wonderful head—which still fascinated the Englishman. The latter noted the added intellectuality of the face since it had been clean shaven. It was a splendid face.

"No." There was an anxious light still lurking in the wide eyes of the inventor. "But it is the beginning. Only the beginning. Who knows what may happen next?"

Ruxton threw up his head. His eyes were full of a world of pain and suffering. The change had been wrought by the man's last words.

"That is it," he cried. "It is not the destruction at the yards. It is that which also they may do—which they have done. It is that which has brought me here now. I am nearly mad with anxiety and dread. I am thinking of your—daughter, sir. I can find no trace of her at her house, or elsewhere. She has gone, vanished, spirited away without a word to her—friends."

The Prince's face became a study in bewilderment. His luminous eyes looked to have grown bigger than ever. He opened his lips to speak. Then he closed them. Then he fumbled in his pocket.

"Since when has she ——?"

But he was not permitted to complete his question.

"Since the day of your arrival here, sir," Ruxton cried. "I wired her a message, and it remained unanswered."

"Tell me of it." The puzzled expression remained, but there was more confidence in the Prince's manner. He was grasping his folded letter in his hand. He had remembered its contents, and the promise it had demanded.

Ruxton briefly told him of the search he had embarked on. He told of the services of Scotland Yard he had employed. And he told of the negative result of all his efforts. Then he broke out in the passionate pain of the strong soul within him. He told this father the simple story of his love. It was simple, and big, and strong. And the Prince, in the simplicity of his own soul, understood and approved.

"I know. I have understood it, guessed it—what you will. I know, and it gives me happiness." He sighed nevertheless. It seemed to Ruxton as though his sigh were a denial. The grey head was inclined. His eyes were bent upon the letter in his hand. He seemed to be considering deeply. Suddenly he raised a pair of troubled eyes to Ruxton's.

"But she is at home. She is at Redwithy. Our enemies have not laid hands upon her. She is not without her fears, but she is well, and unmolested in her home. I had this letter from her only this morning. It came through your father. It must have been written last night. So she was at Redwithy last night. See, here is the heading. It is her writing. I would know it in a thousand. There is a mistake. It must be a mistake."

Ruxton had no answer for him. That which he saw and heard now was incredible. He half reached out to take the letter, but he drew back. He was burning to read and examine that letter, but the Prince gave no sign of yielding it up; and he knew, in spite of all his anxiety, he had no right to claim such a privilege.

Perhaps Von Hertzwohl understood something of that which was passing in the younger man's mind. Perhaps the appeal to his sympathy was more than he could resist. He opened the letter. Then he folded it afresh so that the heading and the signature were alone visible. He held it out.

"Look. You know her writing. There it is—and her signature."

Ruxton leant forward eagerly. He examined the writing closely. Amazement grew in his eyes.

"Yes," he said, as he sat back in his chair. "It is hers—undoubtedly."

And he realized by the manner in which the father had displayed these things to him that it was his way of assuring him that he was not to be permitted to know the contents of the letter.

In consequence, a silence fell between them. And each knew it was a silence of restraint. Ruxton was endeavoring to discover a possible reason for the Prince's attitude, and he felt that his reticence must be attributable to Vita's wish. If it were her wish there must be some vital reason. What reason could there be unless ——? Was she avoiding him purposely? Was her absence from Redwithy her own doing? Was it that now, her work completed, she wished to ——? A sweat broke out upon his broad forehead, and he stirred uneasily.

Then, in the midst of his trouble, the other spoke, and his words helped to corroborate all his worst apprehension. The old man's words were gently spoken. They were full of a deep and sincere regret. But they were equally full of an irrevocable decision.

"Mr. Farlow," he said, in his quaintly formal manner, "I must leave here. I must leave England. There is danger—great danger in my remaining. Oh, not for me," he went on, in response to a question in the other's eyes. "I do not care that for danger to my life." He flicked his fingers in the air. "Danger? It is the breath of life. No, it is not that. I am thinking of my friends. I am thinking of the project which is so dear to my heart—to my daughter's heart, as well as mine. My presence here can only add jeopardy to others. I can serve no purpose. I have your promise that the work will go on to its finish. It is all I can ask. And in that my services are not needed. I shall leave for some part of America. That is all."

Ruxton's thoughtful eyes were searching. He was exercising great restraint.

"Will you be safer in any other part of the world?"

The other hesitated. The awkwardness of his excuses troubled him. He finally shrugged.

"It is not for myself. This place is alive with spies searching for me. I know it. I—far more than the shipyards—am the magnet that draws them here. It is not good for the work. It is not good for you—or your father. Who knows ——?"

"How do you know they have traced you here?"

The Prince's thin cheeks flushed.

"I know it," he said, and the manner of his assertion warned Ruxton that it was useless to proceed further in the matter.

He knew beyond a doubt that some influence was at work, the secret of which he was not to be admitted to. He knew beyond question that that secret had been communicated to her father in Vita's letter. He knew that it was something vital and pressing which she desired kept from him. What was it? For him there was only one explanation. For some incomprehensible reason she meant to abandon him. But was it incomprehensible? Was it? She was a woman—a beautiful, beautiful woman. There were other men, doubtless hundreds of men, who might possess greater attractions for her than he could ever hope to possess. And yet—no, he could not, would not believe it.

CHAPTER XXIV

RUXTON ARRIVES AT A GREAT DECISION

RUXTON spent another long day and night travelling. He reached London and Smith Square in a fog, which by no means helped to lighten his mood. He visited Scotland Yard, where he spent an hour in close consultation, and when he departed thence for Buckinghamshire he was accompanied by a prominent officer. He spent several hours at Wednesford and Redwithy, and finally returned again to town.

His movements were made with a complete disregard for himself. Weary? Depressed and worn out, he admitted to himself he had no time for weariness. He was obsessed by one thought now, one thought which dominated all others. He had lost Vita. She seemed to be passing completely and finally out of his life.

On his return to Smith Square he spent the long evening alone. He would see nobody. He would transact no business, and the faithful Heathcote was distressed, he even protested. But for once the usual amenability of his friend and employer was lost amidst a jarring irritability, and the secretary was forced to leave him to his ungracious solitude.

During that long evening alone Ruxton endured a series of mental tortures such as only the imaginative can ever be called upon to endure. Every conceivable aspect of the situation arose before his mind's eye, clad in the drab of hopelessness, until it seemed there could be no possible place for one single gleam of promise. Many of these pictures were based upon the insidious doubts which never fail to attack those in the throes of a consuming passion such as his.

At one moment he saw, in the disaster which had befallen him, the duplicity of a woman whose love has no depth, whose love is the mere superficial attraction of the moment, and which, under given conditions, can be flung aside as a thing of no consequence, no value. Following upon each such accusation came denial—simple, swift, emphatic denial, as he remembered the treasured moments in the little flat in Kensington; as he remembered the woman of the Yorkshire cliffs; the woman whose shining eyes had revealed the mother soul within her as she appealed for the great world of humanity with passionate denial of self. Doubts of her could not remain behind such memories. It was like doubting the rise of the morrow's sun.

Then, too, the simplicity of his own loyalty, apart from all reason, denied for him. It was the simple psychology of the devoted Slav in him battling and defeating the more acrimonious and fault-finding nature of his insular forebears.

There was reason enough for his doubts. He knew that. The steady balance of reason was markedly his, and once, after a feverish struggle, he allowed himself to give it play, and sought to review the case as might a prosecuting counsel.

The salient points of the situation were so marked that they could not be missed. Vita had gone to Redwithy in a fever of anticipation, with assurances of devotion to him upon her beautiful lips, to await a message from him of her father's safety. That message is duly dispatched. It reaches its destination. It is opened by some one and carefully re-sealed. Vita sends no acknowledgment. Later it is discovered that Vita has left Redwithy, almost on the moment of her arrival at her home, since when she has not returned. Apparently her going is voluntary.

On the face of it, it would appear that she has not received the message. But subsequently she proves, by writing to her father, that she is aware of his safe arrival, which is the news contained in his message. Furthermore, she addresses her letter from Redwithy, as though she desires him to communicate with her at that place. All these facts are so definite that the reasonable conclusion is that Vita has wilfully endeavored to hide herself from him—Ruxton.

That, he told himself, was the cold logic of it.

Then, even as he arrived at the conclusion, a hot passion of denial leapt. It was wrong, wrong. He could stake his soul on it it was wrong. Logic? Argument? Reason? They were all fallible; fallible as—as hell. Anyway, they were in this case, he moodily assured himself. Vita was above all such petty trickery. So contemptible a conclusion was an insult to a pure, brave, beautiful soul. It belonged to the gutter in which, he told himself, he was floundering.

There must be another reply to every question which the evidence opened up. What was the other view of it? He leapt back at once to his first inspiration. Treachery—treachery of the enemy. His first prompting had been that Vita had fallen into their hands. How, then, could this be made to fit in with the letter

Prince von Hertzwohl had received from his daughter? At the first consideration it seemed that such fitment became impossible.

But he attacked it; he attacked it with all the vigor and imagination of a keen, resolute brain, backed by the passionate yearning of his soul. But dark mists of confusion obscured the light he sought—mists of confusion and seeming impossibility through which he must grope and flounder his way.

For a long time there seemed no promise. A dozen times hope fell headlong and died the death. But with each rebuff he started afresh at the given point that—Vita was in enemy hands, whose will she was forced to obey.

After long hours of defeat his efforts wearied. His power of concentration lessened. He found himself repeating over and over again his formula without advancing one single step. Bodily fatigue was helping to oppress his mental faculties. He was growing sleepy. Again and again he strove to rouse himself. But the net results of his effort was a continuation of the idiotic repetition of his formula.

He was not really aware of these things. Mental and bodily weariness had completely supervened. Another few minutes and —— But something galvanized him into complete wakefulness. His weariness fell from him, and he started up in his chair alert—vigorously alert. By some extraordinary subconscious effort he had become aware that his formula had changed. He was no longer repeating it in full—only the latter portion of it: "Whose will she is forced to obey." And as he thought of them now the words rang with a new and powerful significance.

It was the spark of light he had so long sought, and it had leapt out at him from amidst the deep mists of confusion.

So it was that when eleven o'clock came, and the hall gong clanged below, Ruxton went himself to admit his visitor from Scotland Yard. His whole aspect had completely changed from the dispirited creature who had curtly refused to consider matters which Heathcote had placed before him some hours previously.

Inspector Purdic was a smiling, dark man of athletic build and decided manner. He was by no means of senior rank in his profession. But his reputation was unique amongst his colleagues. It was said of him that his record could be divided into two parts, as everybody else's could, but with this difference: his failures came during his early days of inexperience, and could be marked off with a sharp line of division. Beneath that line was nothing but a list of successes.

The officer's manner was deferential. He had had to deal with many men of considerable position. But this was the first time he had been brought into contact with a Cabinet Minister, even of junior rank.

He felt that it was a fresh step up the ladder he had set for his own climbing. He had made his visit there late in the hope that the Cabinet Minister might be induced to give him a protracted and uninterrupted interview, and was pleasantly surprised at the manner in which his explanation was received.

"You see, sir," he said, "it's always a difficulty with us, dealing with a busy public man. So I took a chance, because there's got to be a lot of close talk done."

But Ruxton denied the need for apology.

"As a matter of fact I'm glad you've called—now. If it had been earlier I should not have been so pleased." He laughed, and the smiling eyes of the officer noted the laugh carefully.

"That's all right then, sir."

The two men passed up-stairs to Ruxton's study, and, while he revelled in the enjoyment of one of his host's best cigars, Purdic bluntly set out the objects he sought in this late visit.

"Now, Mr. Farlow," he began, "we've been on this thing some days now, and we're still groping around like a pair of babes in the wood. We've located a few bits. We've discovered certain suspicious circumstances, but nothing's led anywhere, and we're just as far off finding this Princess as if we were dodging icebergs up around the Pole. And do you know why, sir?"

Ruxton was not without ideas on the subject, but he nevertheless shook his head.

"No," he said. He was lounging in the chair which had claimed him nearly all the evening.

The other cleared his throat.

"Because you've set up a brick wall between me and the job you've set me at. The wall's high and thick, and it's plastered with Government political secrecy. You mustn't mind my speaking this way, sir. You see, you want certain work done, and I want to do it. But miracles don't concern me, and that's what you're asking of me, unless you break down that wall. With due respect, sir, it's no use asking men of my profession to disentangle a skein of fine thread and refuse to let 'em handle the skein. It can't be done; that's all."

Ruxton nodded, and the man with the smiling face went on.

"I want to know what lies behind, sir. That's what I've come here for to-night. You'll either tell me, or you won't. You are the best judge of what is at stake, and whether you are justified in disclosing secrets in the hope of discovering the whereabouts of the Princess. The question is, is the discovery of her worth the risk? From the moment I began on this I saw the direction things were taking. Now, this man Vassilitz is a foreigner. All the servants at Redwithy are foreigners. The lady herself is a foreign—princess. Her record during the war tells of her Polish origin. There were three Polands: Russian, Austrian and German. She claimed Russian, and was known by a Russian-sounding name. Her title sounds German. That's all the history of her I have got. But if I'm any judge there's a lot more, and in that additional history lies the secret of her present disappearance. Well, sir, that's my case, and I put it to you. If you cannot see your way to telling me anything more, I can hold out very little hope. I shall naturally continue to work the matter, but ——"

The man was still smiling his involuntary smile, which was due to a curious facial formation. Nor could Ruxton help realizing the perfect mask it became. But his demands were startling and a little disconcerting. He rose from his chair and began to pace the room, his preoccupation finding expression in the gnawing of one of his finger-nails.

The other watched him through the veil of smoke which hung upon the warm air of the room. Finally he came to a halt on the rug before the fire.

"Yes, it's political," he admitted. Then, with a curious upward jerk of his head, and a hot light in his dark eyes: "Damnably political—and secret."

"Yes?"

Ruxton laughed.

"You want more; much more. You want it all." He shook his head. "But you can't have it. That's been the devil of it, eh? No, I can't tell you all you want to know. But I can tell you this much. It's your brains—our brains against all the arch-devilry of the German Government, backed by no less a person than the ——"

The detective gave a long, low whistle.

"It's as serious as that?" He stirred in his chair.

"Serious? It's likely to involve the death of anybody concerned. Not only the victims of these machinations, but of those who interfere on their behalf. There, that's all I can say of what lies behind, and you must be satisfied, or pretend to be. Meanwhile I can tell you something which is going to be helpful to us, which I couldn't have told you if you had paid your visit an hour or so earlier. I have discovered a means by which I fancy the Princess can be rescued from these German demons."

Ruxton turned, and again flung himself into his chair. He was smiling with confidence and hope. The officer insinuated his chair nearer and waited. Every faculty was alert. The other took no notice of his movements. He was absorbed in his own thoughts. He had taken a great decision, and all his imaginative faculties were at work piecing together the pictured details.

The officer coughed. The long pause was becoming too extended for his patience. Ruxton started. He looked round and smiled.

" Listen to this," he said, " and tell me what you think."

It was well past midnight when Detective-Inspector Purdic rose to take his departure. The automatic smile on his face had broadened noticeably, and Ruxton felt that now, at least, it was inspired. He, too, was smiling. His own decision had met with something more than approval from the professional. The man had caught something of the quiet daring of the brain which had been keen enough to penetrate the meaning of certain obscure signs, and reckless enough to evolve a plan of action which promised a possibility of defeating all the trickery against which they were pitted.

Furthermore, the officer had been able to point certain vital matters, and offer suggestions in several directions of importance out of his long experience. Between them they had matured carefully, and placed in concrete form, a plan which, under any other conditions of a less grave nature, must have appeared the veriest of forlorn hopes, and which either of them would certainly have classed amongst the schemes of the most advanced cases confined within the four walls of a lunatic asylum.

" I'm glad I came, sir," said the officer, in his blunt fashion. " I had my doubts about it. It didn't seem to offer much hope, seeing I was dealing with a Cabinet Minister who hadn't seen his way, so far, to opening out on official secrets of his own accord ; and on that score, I admit, it was no use. But you've done better than that, sir. You've taught me something which twenty years of my own business wasn't able to teach me—and it's in my own line, too. I sort of feel, sir, some one's going to wake up with a horrid start, and—it won't be us. Good-night, sir, and thank you. I'll set everything in train without delay. I shall take the five men I mentioned with me when I go north to-morrow, and look to the local police for any other force we may need."

"Good." Ruxton shook him by the hand. "I'll see to the other side of it in—my own way. Good-night, and thank you for coming."

CHAPTER XXV

THE SWEETNESS OF LIFE

VON SALZINGER was in a bad mood. He was feeling the effects of close personal contact with the authority which he had been bred to acknowledge, to obey. In the abstract he admitted the right of it. In practice he had little enough complaint. But in personal contact with the administrators of it the tyranny became maddening. For once in his life he realized how far short of a free-acting, free-thinking being he really was, in spite of the considerable rank of Captain-General to which he had risen.

He possessed all the dominating personality of his race, all the hectoring brutality of his fellow-Prussians. He had no difficulty in submitting to a system which he found pleasure in enforcing upon those who acknowledged his authority, but to endure the personal meting out of such discipline by Von Berger was maddeningly irritating. He felt that his association with the all-powerful intimate of the Emperor was nearing the breaking-point, and when that point was reached he knew that whatever breaking took place he was bound to be the chief sufferer.

His irritation lasted all day. He had received a number of definite instructions, as though he were some insignificant underling. Von Berger had dictated his requirements. And Von Salzinger was galled, galled and furious. Nor was it until Von Berger had taken his departure that he felt he could again breathe freely.

Then had come a letter by hand. It was a letter for Vita, who remained in his charge. But though he read the letter, carefully steaming it open and re-sealing it so that detection was well-nigh impossible, and its contents proved satisfactory, still his temper underwent little betterment.

The day wore on filled with the many duties which Von Berger had demanded of him, and which he almost automatically fulfilled. He saw many callers. He held many consultations. He delivered many instructions in that harsh autocratic manner which he resented in Von Berger. But it was not until after he had dined amply in the evening, and his gastronomic senses had been indulged with an amplitude of good wine and savory fare, that he began to forget the glacial frigidity of the man who had power to reduce his own dominating personality to the level of an anæmic lackey.

After dinner he moved out onto the terrace which fronted the dining-room. It was a splendid night with a bright full moon. It was chilly but refreshing, and Von Salzinger, whatever else his habits might be, loved the fresh air. He paced the broad walk under the moon, and every now and then his eyes were turned upon a distant portion of the upper part of the mansion, where shone the lights of Vita's apartments. At last he seemed to have decided some momentous matter, and returned within the house and flung aside the heavy overcoat he was enveloped in.

The heaviness of his military figure was carefully toned under the perfect lines of his evening clothes. But the rigidity of his square shoulders and back would not be denied. Then, too, the shape of his head. He was Prussian, so Prussian, and every inch a soldier of the Hohenzollern dynasty.

He made his way down the long corridors which led towards a distant wing of the house, and passed on up-stairs.

Vita's days had become poignant with bitterness and self-reviling. But the despair in her grey eyes had lessened, and all the youthful beauty had returned to her cheeks. Her abject dread had given place to a condition of dreary hope which left her haunted only by the hideous memory of the price she had yet to pay.

Her mood was one of self-abasement and self-loathing. She told herself that she was purchasing life, or the chance of it, with all that was best in her. Sacrifice? She had told herself that she was sacrificing her love for her father's life. It was so. She knew she would sacrifice anything to safeguard that. But as time passed, and her dejected mood gained ascendancy, she began to question her purpose with a deplorable cynicism that, in reality, was no part of her nature.

She reminded herself of the cowardice she knew to be hers. How much of the sacrifice she asked was for her father, and how much for herself? Then came the self-castigation. She was afraid to die. She knew she was afraid. And, in utter self-contempt, she told herself she was flinging away the honest love of a man, of which she could never be worthy, as the price of her life. Yes, there was no denying the truth. She valued life—her miserable life—at a price greater than anything else. Her love?

It was a poor thing. It was beneath contempt. She could sell herself to this brutal Prussian that she might live on to see the sun rise for a few more seasons, a few more miserable years of conscious existence.

Such were her feelings as she sat before the cheerful blaze of the fire in her apartment. The evening had closed in, her evening meal had been brought her, and finally cleared away. She had no desire for occupation. There was only thought left her—painful, hideous thought. Everything had gone awry. All plans seemed to have miscarried. She, and her father, and her lover had been out-manœuvred by the Prussian machine, and now, now there only remained a sordid struggle for life itself.

But she was roused, as once before she had been roused, from the depths of her misery by the coming of the man whom she now knew her whole future life was bound to. She heard the door open and close. She did not turn from the contemplation of her fire. Why need she? It was one of her jailers. If it were the women she did not desire to see them. If it were Von Berger she would allow him no sight of her misery. If it were Von Salzinger ——

"Vita!"

It was Von Salzinger. His manner was eager and urgent. It also had in it that suggestion of fear of detection which she had witnessed before.

"It is the answer to your letter. I had it this morning, and would have conveyed it you earlier, but I dared not risk it. Now Von Berger is away, and, for the moment, we are safe. So—here it is. Read it quickly and tell me of it. On it depends so much. The future. Our futures. Your father's. Read it."

But Vita's mood permitted no sudden reaction at the thought of that life and liberty for which she had bartered her soul. She took the letter, and, before opening it, her eyes searched the square features of the well-dined man before her. Her regard was sufficiently cold.

"Where has Von Berger gone?" she demanded.

"To Dorby."

In a moment the coldness had left Vita's eyes. She was caught again in the hot tide of alarm.

"To Dorby? Have they discovered—my father?"

The hard eyes of the Prussian lowered before the woman's alarm. Then his reply came, conveying a momentary confidence which Vita clung to.

"I can't be sure," he said. "But I don't think so. Still it is that possibility which has brought me here now. That, and your letter. There must be no delay if we are to get away. Von Berger has to go elsewhere before he reaches Dorby. He will not reach there until Monday. He will also leave there on Monday, and be back here on Tuesday morning. We must be on the sea before Von Berger reaches Dorby. Now—your letter. Read it."

His final order came sharply. There was no request in it.

Vita tore it open. The alarm was still in her eyes, although there had been reassurance in Von Salzinger's words.

For some moments she read down the two pages of the letter. Then she sighed in relief.

"It is all right," she said, passing the sheets across to her companion. "Read it yourself. He will meet us at the cove on Sunday evening. The submersible will be standing off to pick us up. And—the whole thing remains a secret between us. He has merely told Mr. Farlow that he is going."

If she were relieved there was no enthusiasm in her manner. Safety was looming ahead, but the price was no less. The Prussian's eyes were raised from the letter and a cold severity looked out of them and shone down upon Vita's unsmiling features.

"It is well. But—you regret?" His gross lips pouted under their severe compression.

"Regret?" Vita passed one delicate hand across her brow. It was a movement which expressed something like unutterable weariness. It was almost as if she were beyond caring for consequences. "It is more than regret," she said, and the eyes gazing up into Von Salzinger's were as hard as his own.

The man drew a whistling breath. He realized.

"I believe you hate me," he cried.

Vita shrugged.

"Hate? You are about to give me back my life."

"Yes." The man passed her back the letter. His monosyllable conveyed nothing. It was the expression of one whose thoughts and feelings are entirely preoccupied. A hot fury was surging through his veins. His vanity was outraged. He wanted to pour out the tide of brutal invective which so naturally rose to his lips. But he drove it back under the powerful lash of almost superhuman restraint.

"But you do hate me," he said, with simple regret in his heavy voice. "And I would do anything to change that hate. Why? Why is it? It was not always so. You know the discipline under which we live. All I have done I was compelled to do. Had I not obeyed I could not be here to serve you now. Had I rebelled, and refused to carry out my duty, what hope would there be for you now? None. Farlow could not save you. No one could save you once you were in the clutches of this demon Von Berger. It is only that I have performed my share in your persecution that makes it possible to hold you out a hand of help. You are hard on me—harder than you have any right to be. You would say you are buying your life, I know. Well, do we not buy everything in life? And do we not have to pay a price which always seems exorbitant? The price you are paying; what is it? Wifehood. A future cared for and sheltered by a strong man's hand. Behind you a memory, a memory of that which could never have been fulfilled, because you would have been sacrificed to the discipline of the country which claims you. Ach! it is unreasonable. It is ungenerous. I would give my right hand for your better regard."

But the man's appeal, his arguments, left Vita unmoved.

"Discussion is useless," she said firmly. "We have entered into an agreement which you had power to force upon me. Believe me, I shall not be ungrateful for my father's safety and my own life. But it is a business agreement which makes no demand for the modification of any regard. If my love is demanded, then you must invoke supernatural powers to bring it about. For surely no earthly power could bring about such a revulsion of my feelings. Let us keep to the business."

The hard eyes of the man had grown harder, but his lips smiled, displaying the strong white teeth behind them sharply clenched.

"Yes. To the business. There is much. To-day I have arranged those things which I could arrange. It is fortunate that your father has appointed the one day which we must have chosen ourselves. It must be Sunday night. Sunday night before Von Berger reaches Dorby. Vita, it is a pleasant thought to me that I—I can defeat this man. Ever since he came to England he has treated me like a conscript. I hate him."

Vita watching him realized the truth. It pleased and satisfied her that it was so. To her such animus between these men meant safety.

"Yes? Sunday night?"

Von Salzinger shrugged. He understood her manner.

"Listen," he said sharply. "On Saturday evening at 6:30 you must be ready to get away. At that hour you must be ready, and I will provide you with a long dark cloak for travelling. We shall go by car. We dare not risk any other means. Car the whole way, and the journey must take us precisely the twenty-four hours. Now this is it. When the moment comes I will arrange that your attendants are engaged elsewhere, and that the doors of the corridor are unfastened. You will slip out and pass down the long passage till you come to the main staircase. This you will descend, and reach the hall below. The entrance door will be open. You will pass out and down the drive. Beyond the gates a car will be standing—a cabriolet. The chauffeur will be at the wheel. Without a word you will get in the car. He will at once drive off. I shall join you at Bath, where we shall have a very late meal."

"How will you join me?"

Von Salzinger raised his brows.

"It is simple. I am in command here. My word is absolute. Within ten minutes of your going it will be discovered. I arrange this. I shall be in a fury, I shall terrify those with me. There will be three men. Among them Johann Stryj. I shall curse the women, and then set about running you down. Each man will be despatched in a car to certain places, in directions you have not gone. I shall pursue you alone. So I shall come up with you at Bath. Then you will continue the journey to Dorby with me. I shall time it so we reach the—the cove, eh? at half-past six on Sunday evening. We shall travel all night."

In spite of herself excitement was growing in Vita. The prospect of the race for liberty was alluring and exciting.

"And we go straight for the Old Mill Cove?"

"It is so. This cove. Ha, it is a strange place and—secret. It is your secret and your father's. You will have to guide me." His manner became reflective. "We know so much of the coast, yet we missed this place. It is strange. You know it and your father, but Von Berger—no. So it was that your father escaped. It amuses me now. Still Von Berger does not know. And so we shall escape. Now write your answer to that letter. I will help. We must have no hitch, for unless we get away at that moment—disaster will follow."

Vita had finally thrown off her uncompromising attitude of coldness. She was alive with a thrilling excitement. The man's plans were so simple and adequate. Her only fear was Von Berger's unexpected return. She had moved to a table where writing materials lay and prepared to write her letter.

"Von Berger will not change his plans?" she demanded eagerly.

"He will not change them. He has been summoned to meet —— He is on the sea. He has gone to make his report. Now write."

The next few minutes were occupied in the writing of Vita's reply to her father. It was practically dictated by Von Salzinger, as had been her earlier letter. He left her no choice in what she must say, and, at the conclusion of the writing, read it carefully over, and finally folded it and sealed it himself. He looked on silently while she addressed the envelope to Sir Andrew Farlow. Then he took possession of it and placed it in an inner pocket.

With the completion of the letter his manner seemed to undergo a change. The smoothness, even deferential atmosphere of the man merged into one of sharp suspicion. His brows drew together, and a quick sidelong glance flashed in the woman's direction, and a surly note sounded in his next words.

"It is a fool that can trust a woman—a woman in love. How do I know that your father will not betray me to this man, Ruxton Farlow? How do I know that you will fulfil your promise? You, a woman hating me, and in love with Farlow. I am mad, mad to risk it. You hate me—because I would save you and your father. If Farlow knew there would be no mercy for me. For you I am imperilling my life in every direction. Von Berger, and all he stands for, shadows me from behind. Before me is a man robbed of his love."

Vita had risen from the table. She had turned to the fire and stood leaning against the great mantel.

"Your estimate of human character need not alarm you. Remember, wanton treachery is almost as rare as the highest virtues. Men and women do not betray unless they can see some gain ahead. My father needs safety and security, not only for himself but for me. I, too, want these things. Your conditions will be fulfilled to the letter because we need your aid. Will that satisfy you? Is it commercial enough? You have set the price, and I have agreed to it. Nor am I bankrupt. It is an agreement between us, and the fact that it is not set out on paper, and duly signed by witnesses, makes it surely the safer."

The man's hard eyes were fixed steadily upon the beautiful face.

"Your tongue is bitter," he said in a deep guttural tone.

"But no more bitter than my lot. Please go now. Human endurance has its limits. If you force me to mine I shall fling all to the four winds of heaven, and accept the fate marked out for me by the merciless tyrants who prevail at Berlin."

CHAPTER XXVI

RUXTON WINS A TRICK

It was the close of a long and busy day for both of them, and father and son, in the interim preceding dinner, under a bright moon, paced together the broad stone paths of the formal terrace gardens of Dorby Towers. For Ruxton the confined spaces of the house were suffocating. His nerves were on edge. His father, with the calm philosophy of his years, merely sought the fresh air which the work in his office denied him, even though it possessed the damp chill of an English autumn night.

"Anybody else besides Caistor coming for the week-end?" Sir Andrew's sidelong glance was penetrating.

"Lordburgh and Reginald Steele. There will be others—whom they may choose to bring."

His father's scrutiny was lost upon Ruxton, who seemed to have little inclination to talk. His interest in the week-end gathering seemed of the slightest.

"Well, Caistor and Steele will find plenty to interest them," Sir Andrew went on. "Lordburgh will probably content himself with the golf links."

"Lordburgh will spend his time at the yards," Ruxton said. Then he displayed an increased interest. "He's a Foreign Secretary who sees further than mere international policies. He's a man who believes that an adequate foreign policy can only be built on the foundations of a sound internal economic basis. Caistor and

Steele are armament men of diverging opinions. Caistor pins his faith to weight of metal in surface craft, while Steele places the submarine before the heaviest guns. Both have sound enough reasoning, but, as I said, they are armament men. They cannot conceive that a non-military defence can ever offer sound possibilities. Both have been shaken up by the mercantile submersible project. But I think Lordburgh is the more impressed by it."

"I should have preferred their coming next week," Sir Andrew went on, a little wearily. "We should be under full work then. We are nearly clear now, and the naval mechanics are replacing the civil men next week. It's been hard work for us all. I shall be glad when everything has settled down again."

Ruxton glanced round at the speaker. There was a flash of anxiety in his eyes. It was the first time he had ever heard his father complain of the arduous nature of his work. A wave of contrition swept over him.

"I feel I've left too much on your shoulders, Dad," he exclaimed. "I'm afraid I've been very selfish. I've burdened you with the responsibility of this thing, and given you no support. Somehow, I never thought—and you have never complained."

"Tut, tut, boy," his father retorted, in his gruff, hearty way. "I have yet to learn that I am too old for my work. It's work I've been born and bred to. Without it I should be a decaying man. Don't think of it. Your work is far more responsible, far more harassing. You are among those active thinkers whose life's work is the welfare of our country. Leave me to Dorby. Mark out the work you demand from me, and rest assured it will be thoroughly carried out. I haven't the imaginative brain that sees into the future and formulates plans whereby that future may be safeguarded. But I can build any fleet you can plan—single-handed."

There was pride and admiration in the smile with which Ruxton listened to his father's words. But the man was serious. He knew his limitations, and he also knew his capacity. Besides, he had no intention of admitting the strain of the work in hand.

Ruxton shook his head.

"I'm not even doing that, Dad," he protested. "My time's given up to other affairs. I've simply abandoned everything for one selfish purpose."

Again came his father's sidelong glance.

"Selfish?"

"Yes; Vita. I must find her. I must help her. I must unravel the mystery of it all, or—what is the use of all that I had hoped to achieve? Dad, I no longer blind myself. I have only just awakened to life. All the hopes and longings of the past belong to a time when I still remained slumbering to the real meaning of life. Now, compared with the meaning of life which I have just awakened to, they are mere cold, meaningless products of the brain. They are nothing, simply nothing to this new vista which has just opened out to me. I doubt if you'll understand, if any one can understand but myself."

"No?" There was that twinkling smile in the old man's eyes.

"No. There is only one thought in me now. I must save Vita; I must save Vita from our enemies. Perhaps, even, I must save her from herself. How can I expect any one to understand all it means to me, how absurd seem all those other things which I had counted as vital?"

"And yet I loved your mother."

Ruxton walked on a few steps without reply. A flush had mounted to his handsome cheeks. Then he abruptly paused, and in the depths of his eyes was a shamefaced smile.

"I'm sorry, Dad," he cried. "Forgive the egoism of a man—in love."

His father's smiling eyes were full of a deep sympathy.

"No, no, boy; no apologies. You are no different from the rest of us. We all feel the same at some time in our lives, and we all believe no one else has ever felt as we do. Work out your plans, boy. Forget Dorby; forget everything else for the time. Give your whole heart and time to straightening out the tangle your love affairs seem to be in. And when you have succeeded, bring her to me. For the rest, I am your deputy in the work which must still go on; and, believe me, I shall not fail you. There goes the gong."

The deep note of the gong seemed to rise out of its metal bowels; it crescendoed, and finally died away. The two men passed silently into the house and removed their light overcoats. Ruxton's emotion was too deep for words. His father's sympathy and loyalty were almost overpowering to a nature as sensitive as his. He wanted to tell him all he felt. He wanted to pour out his gratitude. He wanted to show him something of the great love he had always borne him. But it was impossible. He did none of these things because they were men—men of a temperament and schooling that made such a display impossible. So, in silence, they prepared to make their way to the dining-room.

But affairs were busier than either of them knew. In a very few minutes every other emotion became lost in the surge of events.

Just as they were about to leave the hall a man-servant appeared from the direction of the servants' quarters. He was about to pass up-stairs, bearing a tray. The quick eyes of Sir Andrew observed the pile of letters he was carrying up to the library. Without regard for the moment he stayed him.

"Is that the post just in?" he demanded.

The man promptly returned.

"Yes, sir."

"Ah, let me see."

The letters were divided into two small piles: those that were addressed to Sir Andrew, and those for his son. Sir Andrew picked his up. He glanced at the superscription on each envelope, and dealt them back on the tray as though he were dealing playing-cards. At the last one he paused. It was the largest envelope.

"That will do," he said, and glanced across at Ruxton as the man passed on up the staircase.

He tore the envelope open and stood with the contents of it poised in his hand.

"Ruxton."

The younger man turned from the fireplace. His eyes were expectant. His father's tone had been sharp.

"Yes."

"You'd better deal with this." He handed him the lesser envelope, which had been enclosed in the other.

Ruxton took it and glanced at it. His father's eyes were watching him closely; they were twinkling.

"It is tempting, eh?"

Ruxton shook his head.

"But Vita trusts us," he said simply.

Once again Ruxton found himself looking into the wide eyes and remarkable face of Prince von Hertzwohl. With the simple courtesy which was so much a part of him, the latter had thrust his guest into the only chair his uninviting quarters afforded. For himself, he was more than content with the doubtful flock bed, with its frowsy patchwork quilt. The chair creaked under Ruxton's weight, but he said no word. He was waiting, waiting while the other read the letter he had just put into his hands.

Ruxton was disguised in a suit of clothes that left nothing to be desired. Mrs. Clark, the landlady, could have possessed no doubts as to his calling. She knew the type of mechanic too well. Von Hertzwohl was still arrayed in his work-soiled suit, which his intellectual features denied as the yellow lamp-rays fell upon them. Ruxton's outward seeming was calm, but inwardly his active thoughts were teeming. The opportunity which otherwise must have been made had been afforded him without his personal effort. He knew that the crisis in all his plans had arrived. It was for him to turn the course of affairs in his own favor, or accept almost certain defeat. So he waited, coördinating every mental force he could make available.

It was a serious, almost pathetic pair of eyes which were at last raised from the letter, which was in Vita's handwriting. There was something almost like dismay in their wide depths as they encountered the steady gaze of Ruxton's. It was a moment of grave embarrassment

—but only for Von Hertzwohl. He felt like a man hunted before the gaze of the younger man's dark eyes.

But Ruxton had no desire to discompose him. His mind was clear, his course marked out. He saw with perfect understanding the only road by which he could achieve his end. The night when, in the midst of all his doubts and difficulties, he had suddenly caught a glimpse of daylight, he had realized that Vita's father sat under pledge to his daughter. The nature of that pledge was difficult to appraise definitely, but it was obviously directed towards secrecy to which he must not be admitted. His hope lay in admitting its inviolability.

"I want you to listen to me, Prince, for some moments," he began at once. "I have one or two things to put before you, simply and straightforwardly. In doing so I want you to realize my motive. I have told you, her father, of my love for Vita. That love burns as deeply in my soul for her now as it has done ever since I first met her. I want you to know that I am fighting for that love now, that I shall continue to fight for it so long as I have the power. Nothing will deter me; nothing our enemies can do, nothing Vita can say, short of a direct dismissal. This is my motive, simple and honest. I have not come here to ask you the contents of your letter from her. I do not want to know them. I have not come here to press you in any direction which your honor, your loyalty to your daughter denies. I have come here to tell you the things I know, and the things I believe, without exaggeration, and to obtain your consent to a small favor, which, in common fairness, you cannot deny me."

The embarrassment in the deep, shining eyes beneath the shaggy grey brows was growing. To Ruxton they were almost a child's eyes, so simple and earnest, and so full of unconcealed trouble.

"It is an ominous prelude," the Pole replied, with a poor attempt at a smile.

"But not so ominous as the *dénouement* which, I fear, is likely to come when you attempt to leave these shores."

Ruxton's retort came with a quiet emphasis and directness which completely took the other aback.

"I do not see —— Is that a threat, Mr. Farlow?" All the childlike trouble had vanished from the man's luminous eyes. They were shining with a definite challenge which revealed the ready spirit of the man, which Vita always told of.

Ruxton smiled.

"Not from me, sir."

"Then from whom?" The words were incisive.

"From your—our enemies across the water."

All the fire had departed out of Von Hertzwohl's eyes; only was there interest in them.

"Tell me," he said simply.

Ruxton drew a deep breath.

"There is so little—and yet, to me, so much to tell. I cannot force my line of argument upon you, because it is less argument than conviction. I can only tell you those things which I know, and assure you of my conviction."

The Prince inclined his head in a non-committal manner.

"This is the second letter you have had from Vita, in her handwriting, and addressed from her home. These letters have come through my father, just as you have received them. I am prepared to believe Vita has written them, but she has not written them from Redwithy. That I can swear to. Vita has not been near Redwithy since the day of your arrival here."

"And that is—true?"

There was a slight change in the Prince's manner, but it was an undefinable change.

"I will stake my honor upon it. Now," Ruxton went on after a fractional pause, "let us leave that. It could be explained—if for some inscrutable reason she wished to avoid me. Let me point something else. When I came up here to meet you on your arrival I left Vita, who had promised ardently to be my wife, waiting, in a fever of apprehension, for a message from me of your safe arrival. That message was promptly sent, and it reached Redwithy. But before it arrived Vita had left her home with her maid, Francella, in a strange motor-car, for a destination unnamed. And yet in a perfect fever of anxiety she had been awaiting that message. One moment," as the old man, with eyes wide with astonishment, was about to break in. "When I arrived at Redwithy that message was lying amongst a pile of correspondence, all of which had been secretly opened and re-sealed. Would Vita have arranged for that even if she wished to avoid me? Would she not simply have written me a note of dismissal? It is the commonest of common sense." He paused, with brows raised questioningly. "Now come these letters to you, sir," he went on a moment later. "I do not know their contents; I do not wish to know them. But they prove she is aware of your safe arrival. And I judge they are urging you to leave the country, since you expressed no idea of doing so till you received the first letter. Now, sir, one last word and I have told you all I know and all I believe. Either those letters are forgeries or they are written by Vita under pressure. Vita is aware you are here at Dorby. Therefore she has been told, for I do not believe she has seen my message. She has communicated with you by the only means either she or any one else could think of—through my father. She does not know where you are, so she cannot be forced to betray you. But she can be forced to decoy you, or you can be decoyed in her name. Prince, a trick is being played—a clever trick; and my conviction of it is all the greater, since I would stake my life on Vita's loyalty to you—and to me."

The Prince remained silent for some moments. Ruxton had risen from his protesting chair and moved across the room. He refrained from even glancing in the old man's direction. He wanted him to have time. He wanted to exercise no moral influence by appearing to await urgently his reply.

He had outlined the plain facts without studied effect. The whole purpose of his visit was still to be achieved.

He turned at last and came back to his chair as the other cleared his throat.

"There is sense—common sense in what you say." The big eyes of the man were clear and luminous, but they were not looking at his visitor. They were gazing at the oil-lamp on the table. "But you have not read Vita's letters, or you would see that much of your statement becomes impossible. I have not the right to show you those letters, therefore you must accept, or not, what I say. I assure you if there is a trick, or plot, it is so deeply laid that Vita cannot see it; and, in view of her letters, neither can I. Had I not received her letters I could have accepted your beliefs, but those letters put the idea beyond possibility. Mr. Farlow, I am sorry. I could think of no greater delight, or honor, than having you for my son. If what Vita has done, if her course has been arranged with a view to breaking with you, then I can only say I regret more deeply than you can ever dream. All you have done, and are doing, and have dared in my interests have endeared you to an old man's heart just as surely as though you were my son. It is only very, very rarely that men meet *men*. In you and your father I have been doubly fortunate. Will you believe me when I say it? But for the rest it is not for me to decide. Your love for my daughter I realize is deep and sincere. It is for you two to settle it. But that she is in the hands of our enemies I truly and sensibly cannot believe. I assure you there is no hint of it in her letters. One final word. You fear that I am running headlong into a trap. Do not fear for me. I have none. My submersible will convey me to safety as it has done before."

The old man's words, so kindly spoken, so full of regard, and loyalty and courage, came without any shock or disappointment to the other. Not a muscle of his strong face moved. Nor was there a shadow of change from the determination in his dark eyes. When he began to speak, however, a dawn of a smile grew in them. It was a smile of confidence. The attitude of the other had made his purpose a shade easier.

"Then, in face of my beliefs, you will go, Prince?" he asked.

The direct challenge seemed to slightly disconcert the other. Von Hertzwohl had spoken the truth when he said that his regard for Ruxton had become as that of a parent. He felt that his reply must hurt him.

"It must be," he said. Then he endeavored to soften his decision. "It is best so. Best for our work; for you; for—Vita. Ach! I would like to tell you all I have in here"—he tapped his broad brow with a forefinger. "But I cannot. I may not. Dorby has been a haven to me, and I longed to be near and witness the growth of that work which is to make impossible the vile cruelty of men, all the horrors of an indefensible slaughter. I told myself I would sit here and see my dream slowly, step by step, fulfilled. I said that you and your father were the laboring genius setting up the defence which was to serve humanity in the days to come. And in the pride and joy of my heart I told myself that mine was the brain that had conceived this merciful weapon, which I should watch grow to its final triumph. But now I know that it is not so. I may not witness the triumph of my labor here, where it is to be achieved. My presence adds jeopardy to it. It adds jeopardy to you all. It must not be. I have made my mind up. I must go."

Ruxton inclined his head as though in a measure of agreement.

"If it can be done in safety perhaps it is as well," he said.

"Safety?" The wide eyes shining beneath the shaggy white brows were smiling and full of a boyish delight at the thought of adventure. "Show me. How can it be otherwise? Have we not held the secret of our landing? Who is to know the secrets of our cove? The tides—is there a Teuton spy who would face the entrance of that cove and believe that it is free to us to enter or leave it at will? No one would believe it could serve a landing."

"No. And you will go that way?"

"Yes. I shall leave on Sunday night. The tide will serve us at half-past six. It is then dark."

The old man's spirits were rising at the thought of cheating his enemies. His eyes were full of guileless delight. Ruxton was regarding him with something of the same spirit lighting his own smiling eyes.

"It would seem safe enough. I can offer no objection. And yet ——"

"Ach! you still fear for me," cried the other impulsively. "It is the obstinate English in you. Yes, yes. That temperament. You bite hard and will not let go. So."

But Ruxton suddenly bestirred himself. He passed the simple levity of the other by. His eyes had become serious.

"Look at it my way, sir," he said in a deep, urgent tone. "I have told you all I feel and fear. Suppose it was my own father, for some day I hope and believe you will become my other father. Can you not see all it means to me—your safety? I feel you are my trust, and I dare not risk unduly. Will you grant me a favor, sir—a trifling favor from your point of view? Allow me to take such measures to safeguard your going as I see fit. You shall not be made aware of that safeguarding, I promise you—except in case of the treachery I anticipate. I shall not interfere with any plan you may have made. I will, as our naval men say, 'carry on' and 'stand by,' unseen by you and by our enemies—unless danger threatens you. It is not much to ask, and it means so much to me."

The Prince's smile was very gentle as he watched the eager face of the other. The genuine anxiety of Ruxton appealed to him in a degree which was only reached out of his own deep regard. From any other such an appeal might have been met with ridicule. But in Ruxton it became something to be delighted in.

"Have your way," he cried cordially. "Do as you will, and I thank you from my heart for your solicitude. But it is needless. Believe me, it is needless."

But Ruxton ignored his comment. His sanction was all he needed.

"Thank you, sir," he said simply. "Have you given your man his orders for the submersible?"

The Prince glanced down at his letter unconsciously.

"No," he said; "not yet."

And Ruxton understood that his letter had decided the time of departure for him.

"May I convey them, Prince?"

"Why?" The smiling eyes were keenly questioning.

Ruxton laughed.

"Because I would like to make a small arrangement with him, which will in no way interfere with any orders you may give him."

"I see." The Prince was silent for some moments, pondering deeply. Then, quite abruptly, he seemed to reach a decision. "Yes," he said at last, "I will send him his orders in writing, with permission to receive certain instructions from you. But my orders must be obeyed implicitly. Remember that. You must not change them in one single detail. Your word of honor, and I will thank you for conveying them."

"My word of honor," said Ruxton solemnly.

CHAPTER XXVII

THE WEEK-END BEGINS

VITA stood up. The swift rise and fall of her bosom bespoke an emotion which found added reflection in the light of her beautiful grey eyes. Her attitude was tense. It was full of that suggestion of urgency which straining ears ever convey. She was listening. And every muscle of her fair body was tuned to the pitch of her nerves.

Her eyes were upon the face of a small brass lantern clock. The figures on the dial were indistinct in the artificial light, but she read them with ease under the influence of the emotion stirring her. The dull metal hands were almost together. It was on the stroke of half-past six.

Her masses of red-gold hair were completely hidden under a brimless hat, which sank low upon her head. A streaming veil fell to her shoulders, completely covering her hat, and ready to be secured closely about the fair oval of her anxious face. Her costume was a stout dark coat and skirt which displayed to perfection the beauty of her tall figure. Across the back of a chair lay a heavy overcoat of semi-military fashioning. It was thick and warm. It was a man's coat.

The moments ticked away. Vita made no movement. The room was still; a deathly silence reigned throughout the house. And yet, to the waiting woman, a hundred ominous sounds blended with the solemn ticking of the clock. The long hand was within the smallest fraction of the half-hour point. At last she raised one long gloved hand, and the slim fingers were pressed to the temples hidden under the enveloping hat. Her hand was trembling.

When she removed her fingers it was with a gesture of impatience. And the gesture was followed by swift movement. She seized the overcoat and flung it across her arm, picked up a small hand-bag and moved towards the door. Again she paused. Her hand was on the knob of the door. She turned it softly and gently pulled the door ajar. Her eyes sought the crack.

Lights were burning beyond in the wide hallway. All was still, silent; and a deep sigh as of relaxing nerves escaped her. She opened the door wider. It creaked, and her fine brows drew together in anxiety. Then they smoothed again as the creaking ceased. Almost imperceptibly the opening widened. Then, in a twinkling it seemed, she had vanished, and the room was left empty.

As she went a door opened at the far end of the room she had left, and a woman's dark face appeared round it. For a moment she surveyed the empty apartment. Then she smiled softly. A moment later the face was withdrawn and the door reclosed.

A creaking stair set panic raging through Vita's heart. The great staircase was old—so old. She stood, scarcely daring to breathe, wondering in what direction the betrayal would display itself. The moments passed and no sign was given. She moved again, and, in a fever of apprehension, she left the step and essayed another.

This time there was no alarm. She passed on down the stairs, swiftly, stealthily. Only the dainty rustle of her skirts betrayed her movements. This she gave no heed to. It was always with her. Therefore it possessed no significance. The bottom of the great oak staircase was reached. Her breathing was hurried, not with exertion, but as a result of the nervous tension. She was relying on a man's word—a Prussian's. She believed it honest, but—— A swift glance about the wide hall-place, and, for a moment, her nerves eased. The man was proving as good as his word. The doors into the various apartments were closed. The hall was empty.

Fresh courage flowed through her veins. She tiptoed across the polished marble, avoiding the loose rugs lest a slip might betray her. Then, in the centre of it, she stopped dead, her heart pounding out the alarm which had suddenly possessed her. Voices, men's voices, had reached her. And they came from immediately beyond a pair of heavy folding doors. She listened. The sound was slightly deadened. The doors made it impossible to hear the words.

Quite suddenly she realized that there was not a moment to lose. Without any further hesitation she flitted like a ghost, silently, towards the glass swing-doors which opened upon the entrance doors.

She thrust them apart. She passed down half a dozen wide, shallow steps. The outer doors yielded to her hand. Then she breathed the fresh, chill night air of the valley beyond. It was good, so good. It was the first breath of freedom. Deeply, deeply, she drank in the delight of it.

As the door swung gently to behind her, the folding doors of the apartment in which had sounded the men's voices were thrust apart. Von Salzinger and Johann Stryj stood framed in the archway.

" See, there is movement in the glass doors," observed Von Salzinger. " She has gone."

" I heard her," was the Secret Service man's cool reply.

Vita had paused only to put on the coat. Then, with skirts slightly raised, she sped on down the drive at something approaching a run. It was not easy in the pitch black of the night. But fear of pursuit lent her added power, and, surmounting every difficulty, she reached the iron gateway.

She breathed a great relief. The gates were standing open, and, away beyond, and to the right, she beheld the reflection of light upon the roadway.

She hurried towards it. An overwhelming flood of gratitude and thankfulness swept over her. Von Salzinger was proving his loyalty. Every detail was working out as he had promised. Liberty and Life. They were sweet enough. And even the price lost something of its horror under her new emotion.

The car was a large one. It carried three great headlights. The chauffeur was at his wheel, and the purr of the running engines was music to her ears. The door stood wide open, and, without demur, without word, or a single qualm of fear, she stepped within and closed it after her. Instantly the car rolled away.

A figure moved from the dark window of the unlit lodge. It crossed the little room and stood against the wall. Then a groping hand pressed a button, and in the great hall of the mansion the peal of an electric bell rang out.

The week-end party had gathered. Saturday had been spent by the three principal guests under Ruxton and his father's guidance at the yards. But Ruxton had been an unimportant member of the party for the moment. Here in the great works Sir Andrew stood supreme. His was the chief control. His was the genius of organization. And to him these men, Sir Joseph Caistor, Sir Reginald Steele, and the Marquis of Lordburgh, looked for their information upon the new constructions.

It had been a day to remember for Sir Andrew. These brilliant technical men were exacting. Their trained, searching minds displayed a wonderful grasp of detail. There seemed to be no point too small for their consideration. Thus the day had to be entirely given up to them. Nor did Sir Andrew begrudge it. He was a great shipmaster, and his pride in his yards, and all they meant in the country's labors, found him with an almost childlike delight in his guests' interest and understanding.

Ruxton stood aloof. His thoughts and energies were concentrated elsewhere. Frequently he absented himself for long stretches of time together. Nor was it until their naval guests had satisfied their desire to study the new constructions that he became a factor in the day's affairs.

It was after the drive back to Dorby Towers that he slipped into the arena of affairs. It occurred while tea was served in the library. He drew Sir Joseph Caistor and Sir Reginald away from the rest of the party, and held a long private consultation with them.

The result of the consultation was the complete disappearance of Ruxton before dinner. He came into his father's room while the old man was in the midst of dressing.

"They've met me in everything, Dad, and now I'm off," he announced.

The abruptness of his announcement and the unceremonious fashion of his visit caused his father to pause in the act of adjusting his tie. He glanced up into the dark eyes. He needed no added scrutiny. Ruxton's eyes were shining with suppressed excitement. The smile in them was confident, and the set of his jaws told of a determination that was almost aggressive.

"When shall we see you again, boy?"

There was a gleam of anxiety in the deep-set eyes. But there was no suggestion of deterring him.

Ruxton shrugged.

"I can't tell. You see, it will depend entirely on circumstances."

"Yes."

His father returned to his attack on his tie. Then he smiled.

"It was a master stroke having the two heads of the Admiralty on the premises, also our Foreign Secretary. You left nothing to chance, Ruxton."

"Nothing but the chances of the right or wrong of my beliefs."

The old man sighed as his tie went straight.

"Your imagination is beyond me. I could never have seen these things as you see them. I am anxious for you."

"Don't trouble about me. Be anxious if you will, but let that anxiety be for the woman I love, and whom I hope even after this to present to you as your daughter. If she is safe, then—for me nothing else matters. I have done all that is humanly possible, at least which is possible to me. The rest is in the lap of the gods. Wish me luck, Dad, and good-bye."

He held out his hand. In a moment it was enveloped in both of his father's.

"With all my heart, lad. Good-bye. You will win out, I'm sure."

Then he turned again to his dressing-table and picked up his hair-brushes. He attacked his crisply curling white hair with almost unnecessary violence while his eyes watched the retreating figure of his only son in the reflection of the mirror.

Sunday dawned with a clouded, watery sky. All the morning the threat of rain held. Then, at lunch-time, a wind sprang out of the northeast, and the atmosphere grew dry and crisp, and the clouds lightened. The grey North Sea changed its hue to a lighter green, and at long intervals whitecaps broke up the oily aspect. The breeze had freshened by three o'clock and a chill swept over the moorlands, and the feel and aspect of winter settled upon the dull-tinted landscape. As evening began to close in the breeze dropped, and with it fell the temperature.

Two figures paced the winding footpath at the edge of the cliffs. Both were clad in heavy civilian ulsters, and their coat-collars sheltered the lower portions of their clean-shaven faces. In their shaded eyes was that far-off gaze which is only to be found in the eyes of men of the sea. It is an expression which must ever betray the man who belongs to the sea the moment he approaches that element, which is at once his friend and his bitterest foe.

Sir Reginald Steele paused and pointed out at the already darkening horizon.

"What a target," he cried. "Look at her, with her absurdly proud and vaunting four funnels. Look at the great upstanding chest like some vain pouter-pigeon. Man, give me an armored submarine, with a brace of heavy guns on it, and wirelessly controlled torpedoes, and I'd—sink her cold. I'd sink her before she got my range. I'd sink her while she fumbled amongst her cumbersome armaments."

He laughed the merry laugh of a man who wishes to probe the open wound of disagreement between two close friends.

"You're welcome to the submarine, Reggie. I'll take the 'pouter' every time. I'll give you a dozen shots with your wireless controlled as a start, and your pop-guns can amuse themselves indefinitely. She's a handsome craft. Town class, isn't she? She'd make you hate it in spite of your steel-clad hide."

Both men were smiling pleasantly as they watched the distant cruiser steaming slowly and sedately upon the wintry waters. The challenge had been replied to, and neither of the men seemed inclined to carry the debate further. Admiral Sir Reginald Steele had hurled every argument in favor of his submarine beliefs at the head of his friend and chief, during official hours, and they had agreed to differ. Now, in friendly intercourse, he was ready to add his pin-pricks, but he knew there was nothing important to be gained.

"The Farlows are smart men," he observed presently, obviously following out his train of thought aloud. "The old man is something unusual in the way of a shipmaster. One doesn't associate these shipping princes with real understanding of naval force. But once or twice yesterday I thought there were things he could teach me."

"Yes."

Sir Joseph was intent upon the movements of the cruiser. She had displayed no lights and the dusk was creeping on.

"I suppose it is the old man who is the genius of Dorby. What about young Ruxton? Harborough is keen on him. So is Lordburgh. I confess to a weakness that way myself. That was a great stroke of his, getting the secrets of that place in the Baltic. Apparently there's some one also who shares your faith in—underwater."

Sir Reginald had become absorbed in the horizon. He produced a pair of glasses and peered out in the gathering gloom.

"All far-seeing people do. These Farlows for instance," he replied. "What's that beyond the cruiser? She's low in the water."

Sir Joseph produced glasses. For some silent minutes they remained scouring the sea with eyes long trained to the work. Finally it was Sir Joseph who spoke.

"You should recognize it," he said.

"Yes. Underwater, and—a foreigner."

They relapsed into a long silence. The stars came out and a light frost was settling upon the moor. The air was brilliantly clear. Their glasses revealed the two distant objects.

"She's hove-to," observed Sir Reginald later on.

"The cruiser—yes. That's a mistake."

Sir Joseph made a sound of impatience with his tongue.

Again a prolonged silence fell. Both men were absorbed. The passage of time seemed of no consequence. The cold of the night seemed to concern them not at all.

"I don't know," Steele said much later, in answer to his chief's remark. "You can't tell what's doing from here. Nor what arrangements young Farlow has made. Ah!"

"Lights." Sir Joseph waited.

"Green astern. White ahead. Red amidships. The foreigner has shed a pinnace. It's coming ashore. It's getting interesting. That boy seemed pretty clear. I hope things are all right."

The boat was racing towards the shore at a point to the right of the two watchers. Sir Reginald was following it closely with his night glasses. The other continued his survey of the vessels beyond.

Presently he spoke.

"She's steaming again—the cruiser."

"Yes." The other's glasses were raised towards the horizon again.

"She's covered the foreigner's lights." Sir Joseph lowered his glasses. "What's the time?"

His companion lowered his glasses. He glanced at his watch.

"Nearly half-past six," he said significantly. Then in a moment his glasses were levelled at a point much nearer into land. "Ah, here she comes," he said, in his quick way. "Now the play begins. The curtain's going up. No lights. A good many regulations are being broken to-night. Shall we need an enquiry into it, Chief?" Sir Reginald laughed. "Well, Lordburgh is to blame if any trouble occurs. He forced us to lend our powerful aid in this thing. The odds are on that boy Ruxton. I'd bet my hopes of pension on it. He's keen and confident. Such romance never came our way, eh? I haven't heard before of units of the British Navy being used to secure a man a wife."

Sir Joseph laughed shortly.

"There's a good deal more than a woman in this. According to Lordburgh this trifling naval episode may secure the person of Germany's strong man—criminally engaged. It would be worth while. Sparling's a good man. If they pull it off it'll be his best day's work. Hello!"

At that moment a great white beam of light shot athwart the sky. It moved swiftly and rigidly. It swept in a great arc and settled on the face of the cliff away to their right.

"Look. Three lights just below us." Sir Reginald pointed out upon the water. "Green astern. White ahead. Red amidships. It isn't the foreigner from outside. It's ——"

"Hark!" Sir Joseph held up a warning hand.

The two men listened acutely. Far away, remote but distinct, the sound of a pistol-shot reached them.

"That's the second," said Sir Joseph. "Come along, let's go and see what's happening."

CHAPTER XXVIII

THE WEEK-END

PRINCE VON HERTZWOHL gazed about him. His tall figure was bowed. He was no longer clad in the working costume which had been his disguise for so many days in Dorby. His lean face was shaded beneath a wide, soft-brimmed hat which entirely concealed that wonderful forehead which had so impressed Ruxton. But the shaven cheeks added years to his age. Beneath his chin were displayed those fleshy cords which do not belong to anything up to the middle life. He certainly looked older than ever in the foreign-designed clothes which he was now wearing.

The cold breath of the moor swept by him, it penetrated the lightish overcoat he was wearing. Once or twice he shivered as he gazed this way and that, searching the already hazy sky-line for a sign of any movement.

For some time he seemed in doubt. Then at last he drew in towards the black shelter of the old mill, which stood out in the grey light, keeping its ancient watch over the cove below. He glanced within its shadowed interior. It was inhospitable. But it was as he had always known it. Everything was undisturbed. He drew his coat about him and buttoned it up. The air was so keen, and he had little relish for it. Presently he sat down upon a fallen timber under the shelter of the wall. He must wait. Nothing could be done until the arrival he was expecting.

It was a desolate spot, and the influence of it was not unfelt. But the solitude was not altogether unappreciated. If there were eyes watching they failed to make their presence felt, and he was glad. He lit a cigar and sought comfort in it from the bleak northern air. His thoughtful eyes wandered in every direction his shelter permitted. To the east, across the sea. To the south, over the rolling moor. To the west, where the dying light of day was melting steadily before the grey obscurity of coming night.

The minutes passed slowly, slowly, as they ever pass to the anxious mind. But the dark of evening gathered with all the rapidity of early winter.

The long journey was drawing to its close. Long since, the great North Road had been left behind. Now the powerful car swept along, with its monotonous purr, over the winding coast road, which split the wide-spreading moorland, and headed on in the teeth of the bitter northeasterly breeze.

The chill penetrated to the snug interior of the car. Vita was forced to draw the heavy overcoat more closely about her. She shivered, but it was not with the actual cold. Her thoughts were a-riot. They were full of an intense and painful dread.

She had made the journey north in the company of the man whom she knew she was now condemned to marry —condemned beyond reprieve. The only gleam of light which had struggled through the darkness of her despair was that he had spared her his company in the car. He had dismissed the driver of the car at Bath, and taken upon himself that duty. Thus Vita had been spared an added torture to the desperate feelings assailing her.

She had no thought of revolt. She felt that destiny loomed before her in overwhelming force. Escape had no place in her thought. She had entered into a contract. A sordid contract, she felt. A contract which had perhaps been forced upon her, but which had been accepted by her through an invincible desire to be permitted to drag out the weary years of life, rather than face bravely the harsh consequences and penalties of truth and loyalty to the demands of honor. She admitted the dreadful cowardice which had driven her, and a wave of loathing for herself left her crushed under a burden of bitter contempt.

But during the journey, in communion with her own wretched thoughts, she had searched the future as only vivid imagination permitted, and the picture she had discovered was perhaps a thousandfold more dreadful than her earlier anticipations. Panic had urged her in the first place. But now the original panic which had driven her into her contract had passed, leaving her only the skeleton, which, in the first place, had been clothed in the brilliant flesh and raiment inspired by the yearning for life. To think of the right she had given that square, fleshy figure sitting before her beyond the glass partition of the car! The right to control her destiny; to be always near her, to—caress her. And all the while another image lay treasured in her heart, another voice was always in her ears, another hand lay in hers, and other lips—— It was beyond endurance—the thought. To think that way lay madness. Her eyes grew haggard with dry tears. She was left beyond ordinary emotion. She could only stir restlessly, with brain heated almost to fever by the pressure of dreadful thought.

So the miles had been devoured by the senseless, softly droning wheels. Merciless wheels they became. Nothing could stop them, nothing could deter the progress towards that maelstrom of horror in the direction of which she was gliding.

Then came the familiar breath of the Yorkshire moorlands. She remembered it. She remembered every aspect of the scene about her. It was not possible for it to be otherwise. She writhed under the lash of memory. Was it not here she had first looked down upon the prone figure and upward-glancing dark eyes of Ruxton Farlow? Was it not here she had poured out to him the vaunting story of her desires to serve humanity? Had she not witnessed the light of sympathy leap into his eyes here—here, at the passionate profession she had made to him? And now—oh, the pity of it!—the miserable, cowardly sequel to all her protestations.

The grey of evening filled the car, and somehow Vita was glad of it. She felt she could hide her worthless self beneath it. The moorland scene faded, and the great dark gorse banks merged into one blackening world. Then, directly ahead, the aged landmark of the skeleton mill rose sharply out of the dusk.

Her pulses quickened. The journey was at its end. Her father would be there awaiting her, and she must face those wide, understanding eyes as she told him the story of her cowardly yielding. She shrank further into the corner. She knew the fearless spirit of the man, and she dreaded his contempt. The secret of her contract with the man driving the car was still her own, but, in a few minutes, it must be revealed to one whose contempt would deal the final crushing blow.

She nerved herself as the car drew up. Then, with ashen lips and frightened eyes, she became aware of a tall, lean figure standing out against the sky-line.

She waited for no assistance. She flung the door wide, and, in a moment, she was enfolded in her father's embrace.

But she dared not yield to the joy of reunion. She freed herself, and began to talk. Not a moment must be lost in telling him her story, the story of all the dread and horror she had lived through. She knew she dared not risk delay, or her last vestige of courage would vanish into thin air.

She poured out the story of the machinations, in the toils of which they had been caught. She told him the story of the jeopardy in which he stood; of the power which had been transferred from Berlin to bring about his final destruction. She told him of the death sentence which had been passed upon her by the terrible Von Berger, and how, in the last moment of her despair, succor had been proffered in the last quarter from which it could have reasonably been expected. And then came the story of her pledge.

To the long story the old man listened with the closest attention. He gave no sign, he offered no interruption. At its conclusion Vita paused, breathlessly awaiting the verdict in the man's luminous eyes. She watched them. She searched them, seeking that faint spark which might hold out the smallest hope. She was living for that alone —now.

The Prince stood for a moment, his eyes gazing past her at the sides of the travel-stained car. Then one long thin hand went up to his forehead, and his soft hat was thrust back on his head. The hand pressed down upon his brows and moved across them, as though brushing aside some sense of weariness. His eyes shifted their gaze towards the man standing near the car. They took in the square, burly figure from the crown of its hat to the soles of its feet. Then they came back to Vita, and the smile in them suggested a final sympathetic decision overriding the natural antagonistic feelings towards the man whom he looked upon as his enemy.

"Where is he—Von Salzinger?" he demanded.

Vita caught her breath. It was the crisis.

"Here, father. He drove the car."

The Prince's eyes again sought the man. Then he spoke, and the tone of his voice eased the woman's tension.

"You have done me a service, Herr von Salzinger. A service I could hardly have looked for. It is to be paid for, I understand, and the price is high. However, the risks you have taken, the sacrifices you have made are doubtless great, from your point of view. Therefore I can only—thank you. Come. The vessel should be lying off by this time. What will you do with the car?"

Von Salzinger stepped forward. The night was dark, and it was impossible to observe the expression of his face.

"The car can remain. It is—not mine."

The Prince inclined his head.

"Then we will go down to the cove. Vita!"

At the gentle tone of his voice the woman moved at once to his side. Whatever his innermost thoughts and feelings, he had conveyed to her troubled heart the assurance of his perfect love and sympathy.

A man stood in the steel doorway of the clumsy tower which supported a pair of periscopes. The vessel was an early type of submarine. It was crude in finish and severe in fashion. Its flush deck was narrow, and a mere rail protected its sides.

His attention seemed divided between a group of men in oilskins engaged in launching a motor pinnace, and the movements of a war-craft standing off some distance astern.

Night was closing upon an oily sea, which lolled in listless fashion beneath the starry sheen of a now almost windless evening. The threatened "northeaster" which had been developing all the afternoon had suddenly died out under the influence of a sharp frost. There was a certain satisfaction in the luck of the weather. This man knew quite well what he might have been called upon to face on the bitter northeast coast of Britain.

The stone-grey eyes of the man were no less keen than the bitter air. Nor were they less watchful than the peeping stars already beginning to stud the sky. The rest of his face was lost in the folds of a woollen scarf, which was in turn enveloped in the high collar of his overcoat.

There was the sound of footsteps behind him coming up the steel companion, and in a moment he was joined by a man in oilskins. The latter were carelessly adjusted about the neck, and from beneath them peeped the details of a uniform which was foreign to the coast off which the vessel was lying.

The newcomer joined in the survey of the war-craft's dim outline against the horizon.

"She's not there by chance, Excellency," he said warningly, in the deep guttural of the Teutonic language.

For some moments the other made no reply. His eyes were upon the men at work. The boat was launched, and the engine was being started.

"No," he said at last. Then his eyes came sharply to the other's face. "You have had to take big chances in your time. You've got to take a greater chance now. This is not war."

"No, Excellency. This is peace." The man laughed deep-throatedly.

"That is why the warship does not matter. She will not break the peace, and we are beyond the home-water limit. We are free to do as we please."

"And yet she is watching us. It interests me what she intends. These British naval men are a different race from those ashore. They will do as they think, in spite of—peace."

"Yes." There was a speculative look in the stone-grey eyes.

Finally he gave his whole attention to the men on the deck. He seemed to have put all speculation aside.

"Von Hertzwohl's submersible will soon be along now. We shall see her lights. She will carry lights. She must do so for the shore boat. You have your orders."

"Yes, Excellency. When you have left in this boat the other will be prepared. I shall take a party and board Hertzwohl's vessel, and make myself master of it. Meanwhile, this vessel will lie off with lights out, standing by in case of accidents to pick you up. If all goes well you will return from shore and come aboard Von Hertzwohl's vessel. Instantly she will submerge and lay a course for Heligoland Bight. It is clear, and should be simple."

"It should be simple. Hertzwohl's vessel *must* go back with us. She has the U-rays lamp on her." The grey eyes were turned questioningly in the direction where the war-vessel had been lying. The darkness had become such that its outline was scarcely visible. Then he went on. "This vessel will follow us to the Bight. Ha!" He thrust out a pointing hand. "The lights. Red. Green. White." He turned again, and his eyes were hard and stern in the light of the conning-tower. "Make no mistakes. Your orders to—the letter."

"Yes, Excellency."

Both men moved off down the gently swaying deck towards the break in the rail where the pinnace, with its complement of four men, was waiting. The man with the stone-grey eyes leapt into the boat. The next moment its crew had cast off, and its head had been swung round shorewards in response to the race of its powerful motor.

Suddenly a great beam of light shot athwart the sky. It lowered slowly, and, a moment later, it fell upon the submarine, on the deck of which a number of men had replaced those which had just left. For a moment the officer in charge of them looked up, and his eyes were caught in the dazzle of the blinding light. Then the light was raised and swept away landwards. It described a great arc and fell upon the shore. A moment later it was withdrawn. Again it settled upon the submarine.

The officer waited for it to pass. A look of deep anxiety began to fill his eyes. He was thinking of his orders, and of the man who had given them. But the light remained focussed full upon his deck, and presently it dawned upon him that the warship was steaming, steaming slowly and almost noiselessly towards him. A feeling of impotence took hold of him. He thought of his torpedo tubes, but the thought passed, thrust aside with an impatient remembrance that it was peace and—not war. His impotence grew. He could only stand there helpless and stupid.

The great vessel came on slowly, slowly. Soon its outline became clear, even in the darkness. The silent threat became unnerving. The officer ordered his men to desist from their work. The vessel drew abreast. Then she hove-to. But the terrible glare of the searchlight remained full upon the long, narrow deck upon which the officer stood.

His eyes sought for a sign. But the blinding light held him. He could see nothing. Just a shadowy, sombre hull. The great guns were not visible to him in the painful light.

There was no alternative. He turned to the conning-tower, and his men were sent below. The next moment the engines were at work, and the vessel submerged. Minutes later a swirl of water a quarter of a mile distant, and a great bulk rose to the surface out of the watery depths. The steel door of the conning-tower opened again, and the officer looked out. The beam of light from the war-vessel was gliding over the lolling surface of the water. It was moving towards him slowly, as though searching carefully. Again his vessel was caught in its silvery shaft. Again it held. Again the great vessel began to move towards him.

With a bitter oath the officer turned back into the conning-tower and slammed to the heavy steel door.

Vita and her father were standing at the water's edge. A pace or two behind them stood Von Salzinger. None of the three seemed inclined for speech. Von Hertzwohl was gazing out at the narrow opening to the open sea beyond. His thoughts were busy with the unexpected phenomenon he beheld.

A searchlight was playing over the water, moving at intervals, then it would become stationary. The vessel from which it emanated was a long way out, yet its light hovered persistently, as though its whole purpose was riveted upon the definite area which lay in full view from where he stood.

Vita, too, was gazing out to sea. But though the play of the lights caught and held her attention, they had no power to sway the trend of teeming thoughts which were passing through her brain. The things she beheld meant nothing to her. They could mean nothing. These were her last moments on the land she loved—the land which was the home of the man who had changed her life from a troubled and anxious existence to a dream of bliss such as she had believed impossible. She had sold herself at the price of life. Life? She had gone back again to existence a thousand times more dreadful than the worst nightmare could have conjured. Yes, her father was safe, her beloved father. All their plans would be the safer for their going. She would be free to witness, in due regularity, the progress of future seasons. She had done her duty, and her best. But oh, what a best!

There were moments as she stood there waiting when she could have flung her arms out and screamed till the echoes of the cove rang again. There were moments when she could have flung herself upon the angular figure she knew and felt to be standing behind her, and impotently torn at his hated flesh. He was her master, her future arbiter, the man to whose caresses she must submit.

Quite suddenly her father raised one thin, pointing hand.

"The boat," he said. And Vita's thoughts were swept aside for the moment, and her comprehending gaze became fixed upon a dim object sweeping through the jaws of the cove. The darkness of the place made it impossible to distinguish its outline. It was a shadow, a mere shadow against the moving lights beyond.

Once it was past the jaws, however, the throb of its engine beat against the rocky walls and echoed again. It was as though half-a-dozen engines were thrashing the water. Now, too, a headlight shone out.

Suddenly Von Hertzwohl caught up the lighted lantern at his feet.

"Ach!" he cried. "The madmen! They are heading here—for this light. One would think they had never made the spit before." He turned. "Quick. The spit, or they will drive on the rocks."

He ran along the beach, followed by Vita and Von Salzinger. In a few moments he was standing on the extremity of the rocky spit, waving his lantern and calling instructions.

"Gott in Himmel!" he cried. "Slow, slow. You will break on sunken rocks. Are you mad? This way. Ach! Slower, slower. So. Easy. Bring her nose round. So. Easy. Now!"

The old man stooped, and, with Von Salzinger, assisted in fending off the pinnace. Vita had taken up the lantern. She was holding it to make the most of its feeble rays. Then of a sudden a sharp exclamation broke from the Prince.

"Four!"

He had counted the men in the boat. Vita heard the exclamation without gathering its significance. A man leapt out of the stern of the boat, and another followed him. The light of the lantern fell full upon the leader's face. A cry broke from the woman, an inarticulate cry. It brought her father to his feet.

Then, swiftly and terribly, was enacted a scene unforgettable to those who beheld it. The wide, fearless eyes of the princely Pole gazed with loathing and hate into the stone-grey eyes of the man who had leapt first from the boat. It was only for one paralyzed moment. Then a harsh, furious voice ejaculated a name, and Vita's lantern clattered as it fell upon the rocky spit, and went out as it rolled into the lapping water.

"Von Berger!"

It was Von Hertzwohl's voice; and as he spoke he stepped back from the hated proximity. Once, once only his wide eyes swept over the various figures about him. Then, with a lightning movement, one long arm was flung out. There was no word spoken. There was no mercy in either heart of the antagonists. The penetrating crack of an automatic pistol alone awoke the echoes. They were flung from rock to rock, and, blending with them, came the sound of running feet.

But long before the echoes had reached their climax a second shot rang out—a heavier shot; and as it split the air Von Hertzwohl fell. His knees gave under him, and his tall figure toppled almost into the arms of the man who had fired the shot with such deliberate, deadly effect. To this sound was added swift movement. Vita, standing paralyzed with terror, was seized from behind, and the heavy breath of Von Salzinger fanned the back of her neck. She was supported bodily, and, in an instant, the swaying boat caught her struggling body with brutal force, and for her all sensation abruptly terminated. Then came Von Berger's voice in sharp command, as the shouts of men aroused new echoes in the black arena.

"Quick! Take him! Now cast off!"

The arms of men reached up and caught the inanimate body of Von Hertzwohl. It was dropped urgently into the bottom of the boat. Then, to the accompaniment of scrambling feet, the boat was vigorously propelled backwards into the ebbing tide.

The headlight was extinguished, and the boat vanished like a ghost into the blackness of the gaping cove.

A moment later the racing engine pulsated with a confusion of echoes, and a group of men stood at the water's edge searching for the direction in which the speeding craft was moving. It was hopeless.

Then came a voice—the authoritative voice of a leader.

"Don't fire. Not a shot. You can't be certain who you'll hit. They won't get far."

CHAPTER XXIX

THE CLOSE OF THE WEEK-END

A SENSATION of dreadful pain swept through an eternity of obscurity, impenetrable to all but a subconscious emotion. Horror floated through a world unseen, unknown. Terror thrilled senses dead to all reality. An abyss yawned on every hand, a black abyss in which stirred, all unseen, a threat so overwhelming that the victim remained passive, defenceless; waiting, waiting for the final crushing torture.

The blackness changed. It gave place to a deep, ruddy light. It was a light which inspired a sensation of fierce burning. The scorch of it was devastating, yet the torture went on as if the limit could never be reached.

The ruddy light faded to a grey twilight, through which shot tongues of forked flame, and, with each rift in the grey, pain shot a hundredfold more intense for its broken continuity. A terrified shrinking resulted. The moments of respite became a period of mental torture greater than the reality of the stabs of blinding light.

It seemed that no suffering could ever equal such agony again. It was living death.

Again it all changed. The bodily suffering no longer broke intermittently. Terror had given place to a grinding physical burden of agony in which something approaching consciousness had place. It came with a hammering upon the straining brain, and beat its way through the body, right down to the very depths of the tortured soul. It was unbearable, yet its burden seemed inevitable, and complaint seemed hushed by an irresistible power.

Then in the midst of all the torture a sound reached the victim. It was the sound of a voice, of voices. Harsh, jarring voices, carrying threat in every tone. It was the magic touch which brought about a vague semi-consciousness, and Vita's eyes slowly opened.

The pain went on, burning, throbbing pain, but she did not mind it. She was scarcely aware of it. The voices held her, and she struggled with all her power to grasp and hold their meaning. But the effort was beyond her. Only the words came, and with them a growing, unaccountable fear inspired by the violence of their intonation.

"Trapped like rats in a pit," she heard a voice cry out in thick tones.

"That door. Fool! They must come that way. We can shoot them down as they come. Trapped? They'll pay dearly for the trapping."

What were they talking of? And why in such tones? What were those other sounds she heard? Vita remained unmoving, helpless, and without understanding.

Suddenly a crash overwhelmed every other sound. It left her poor head whirling with uncertainty.

Then something else shivered through her every nerve. Another sound—different. There was a clatter and bumping, and strange, sharp explosions, such as in a vague way she half remembered having heard somewhere before. What was it? Each sound seemed to bite the air, echo, then die out. Then quickly on its heels another followed, and then another. Every explosion gave her a stab of exquisite pain in the head, her aching, throbbing head, in which the sufferings of her body seemed to find a sort of dull, constant echo.

Now came the sound of voices again. But they were indistinct exclamations which conveyed nothing to her. What was that tearing and crunching? A perfect pandemonium had suddenly been let loose, in which voices and biting explosions blended with the rush and scuttling of many feet. A dreadful nightmare of noise disturbed her. The hoarse cries of the voices were distressing. Something, something—— Hark! What was that? That voice. She knew it.

"Hold him! Gad! He's like a tiger. Smash his wrist! Only get that gun from him! Ah! That's it. Now—see if he has any more weapons."

Full consciousness had suddenly awakened. The familiar voice had succeeded where pandemonium had failed. Vita stirred with infinite pain. With a great effort she moved her body. She could have wept with the torture of it. That voice. She must see him. She must gaze upon the face of the speaker. She must—— With a lurch she strove to raise herself upon her elbow. For one dreadful second an agony surpassing anything she had ever endured crowded her brain, and swept through her nerves to every extremity of her body. Then she fell back, engulfed in the black abyss of complete unconsciousness.

Three men were seated in the dishevelled saloon of the gently rocking vessel. Brilliant electric light shone down upon the wreckage about them. At the far side of the apartment lay the still form of a woman stretched out upon a luxurious settee, which was built against the ship's side. In another direction another inanimate form was stretched out upon a lounge. But this was the lean figure of a tall man with grey hair and bushy eyebrows. His face was ghastly, and his eyes were staring. His square jaw was hanging loose, and his lips were agape.

These two figures seemed to have no interest for the three men who sat facing each other. One of them was seated on a chair that was fixed to the deck with its back swung round against the table. He was sitting in a hunched attitude of great pain. One hand was supporting the other arm just above the wrist. His stone-grey eyes burned with a desperate light.

The other men were within two yards of him. One, a youngish-looking man, in British naval uniform, was seated on the edge of a table. With his right hand he was grasping the butt of a revolver, whose muzzle was lying across the fleshy part of his thigh. The other, in civil dress, was astride of a chair.

The man in civil dress was speaking. His voice was stern and cold. And, by the expression of his dark eyes, it was obvious that he was holding himself under a great restraint.

"This is a bad end for a man holding the great position which Prince Frederick von Berger occupies," he said. "I want you to understand, Prince, that it is the end, just as surely as the sun will rise to-morrow. Do you grasp the position? I am not here to taunt you with it. But for your own sake I must make it clear to you. Your fellow-conspirator, Von Salzinger, has by this time been lowered to his last resting-place beneath the waters. For you there will be less mercy."

He paused, narrowly observing the fierce light shining in the desperate eyes. Ruxton had no desire for unnecessary cruelty, but Vita was lying injured and unconscious just across the room, and he had no thought to spare the author of her troubles.

"Make no mistake, Prince," he went on again, continuing his use of the Prussian's own tongue, and fighting down his own deep feelings, "there will be no succor from your countrymen. You have deliberately caused the murder of Von Hertzwohl upon British soil, and for that you will pay the full British penalty. That penalty, Prince, is the rope which awaits every common murderer."

Von Berger threw up his head in a fury of denial. The naval man sat alert, and the barrel of his revolver moved a shade. But the Prussian made no attempt at the violence which was gleaming in his eyes. His wrist had been smashed in the struggle which had taken place, and he knew he had no chance with these men.

"England dare not place me on trial, and condemn me," he cried fiercely.

Ruxton raised his brows.

"Dare not? You can put those words out of your head, Prince. The time has gone by when international relations could affect the administration of our courts of justice. Your own country has taught us the absurdity of such a policy. We have learned the necessity of protecting our own at any cost—even at the cost of war. You will be tried, and hanged for the murder you have committed."

The solemnity of Ruxton's words was not without effect.

A curious questioning incredulity crept into Von Berger's desperate eyes. His lips parted to protest. Then they closed again in a spasm of pain. But a moment later his cold voice was speaking.

"There is no power on earth which can give you the right to hand a royal prince over to your police," he said. And his coldness and calmness were a triumph of the man over physical suffering.

"There is no power on earth which will stop me doing so—if you land at Dorby, where we shall presently head for."

Ruxton's manner was frigidity itself. His dark eyes looked steadily into the other's.

Quite abruptly a hard, mirthless laugh broke the silence.

"If I land?"

"If you land."

"Will you explain?"

Ruxton shrugged coldly.

"Is there need? I am prepared to display a lenience which is the only mercy you need hope for. You will be given the freedom of the deck for half an hour. We are lying awash. There is only a bare rail about it, a rail between you and the water. After that we return at once to Dorby—and the authority which deals with every common felon."

The two men sat eye to eye for a few moments. It was a rapier-like exchange of glances. It was the Prince who yielded. He stirred. A sweat had broken out upon his forehead. His physical suffering was beyond words. But he rose to his feet and stood firmly confronting his antagonist.

"I will accept—the freedom of the deck," he said.

Frederick von Berger gazed out over the restless waters. He swayed easily to the added motion of the now stationary vessel. Twenty feet away stood the young naval officer lounging against the steel casing of the doorway of the conning-tower. His eyes never left his charge. Nor could he help a faint twinge of regret. He had been brought up in that wonderful school of the British Navy in which physical bravery counts for so much, and he knew that such was not lacking in the man whose movements he was so closely following.

The night was clear and cold. A great wealth of stars shone down upon the phosphorescent waste of water. So intense was their brilliancy that even the distant sky-line, towards which Von Berger's gaze was turned, stood out with remarkable clearness.

Beyond that sky-line lay Germany—the country whose curious fate it had been to breed a race of brave men and brutes, and to mould them into the single form of a splendid manhood. To that country the motionless figure belonged, an epitome of those curious racial characteristics. Birth had given him the place, and opportunity the power. Thus, through a soulless intellect and courage, he had been able to help in the fashioning of the monstrous machine, as yet unbroken, which was still seeking to plough its furrows through a world's spiritual civilization for its own ruthless ends.

Possibly he yearned for the cradle of his aspirations. Possibly now, now that it lay so far away, hidden beyond the watery limits, he felt something of the futility of the cold striving for earthly power. If it were so his expression gave no sign. The eyes remained the same coldly shining windows of an empty soul. The hard mouth was tightly shut, and the muscles of his square jaw were tense. All he left for the shining eyes of the night to witness were the beads of moisture upon his broad forehead. And these were the simple outward signs of the frailty of the human body, its vulnerability, its narrow limitations. The spirit alone, whatever its quality, remained invincible.

He moved a step nearer the steel rail. He leant against it. Then, for some terrible moments, from the manner in which he nursed his injured member, agony seemed to supervene and shut out every other emotion.

The moments passed. The young naval officer shifted his position. The strain was telling upon him.

The man at the rail moved again. His gaze was withdrawn from the horizon. It was turned towards the sailor. The officer averted his gaze. He could not face the eyes which were yet beyond his discernment. He knew their expression without seeing it. He understood the man's object. This was the moment he had awaited. The Teutonic mind was silently hurling all the power of hate and defiant contempt of which the distorted spirit was capable at those who had forced him to his final desperate act.

There was the faintest sound of a splash. The young officer's eyes came back, searching for his charge. But where Frederick von Berger had stood there only remained the unbroken line of the rail.

Then a voice spoke sharply behind him. It was the voice of Ruxton Farlow conveying orders to Captain Ludovic in the turret.

" Dorby without delay," he said. " The pilot will pick us up at the Northbank buoy."

CHAPTER XXX

GAZING UPON A NEW WORLD

THE room was very quiet. A wintry sunbeam glanced in through the leaded casement and fell slanting across the floor, lighting up the occupied four-post bed. A uniformed nurse was occupied at a bureau which stood in the window-place, framed in the floral chintz hangings which seemed to suit so well the oaken panelling of the room, and the beams with which the ceiling was so powerfully groined.

The doctor, a benevolent, grey-whiskered, cherub-eyed old man, who had cared for every patient at Dorby Towers since the Farlows came into occupation, was at the bedside talking gently but firmly to his patient.

"It is useless, my dear young lady," he said, with, for him, an almost peevish complaint. "I have done all that a man can do. I have pulled you clear of that wretched brain-fever which threatened you. Your poor, poor arm will soon be out of its plaster, and covered with nothing more disfiguring than a sling, which can at all times be made to match your costume, and yet you will do nothing to help *me*. It is really distressing. You should have been on that couch two weeks ago. A week ago you should have been moving about getting your bodily strength back. I really can't understand such obstinacy. Eight weeks in this bed, and you will not, simply will not, pull yourself up sufficiently to allow your being moved. You know it's a case of that woman, Mrs. Somebody, in one of Charles Dickens's books. I don't remember the name. All I know is she died, or did something equally silly, because she wouldn't make an effort."

Vita gazed back languidly into the fresh, wholesome face of the smiling old man. She was so tired. She was weary with thought. She knew that the doctor was making a just complaint. But she knew something more. She knew, half by instinct, the real cause of the trouble of which he was complaining.

She smiled up at him in a wan fashion.

"I am not as much to blame as you think, doctor dear. You have done, oh, so much for me that I feel I can never be grateful enough. May I sit up?"

The doctor summoned the nurse, and Vita was tenderly propped up against a perfect nest of pillows.

"That's better. Thank you ever so much. Now I can talk, and—I want to talk."

Vita remained silent for some moments in spite of her expressed desire.

The medical man watched her closely. She was a mere shadow of what she ought to be. There was a troubled look in her eyes. He felt, somehow he knew, what was coming. It was a request such as he had been forced to deny her so many times before.

His smile died out. But Vita's eyes, when she finally turned them on him, were bright with an emotion which seemed at first unwarranted.

"Do you know why I can't get well?" she enquired wistfully. "It is not obstinacy. It is not lack of effort. It is because *you* won't let me. Doctor dear, the time has surely gone by when I may not talk of—that night. You see, you don't understand it—all. My father is dead. I know that. The thought is always with me. But that—that is not all. Everybody here is kindness, kindness itself. Mr. Farlow—Ruxton, all of them. They come here. But they are never allowed to stay. They send me everything which—kindness can dictate. But, under your orders, no one will tell me those things I must know, and I am not permitted to say a word of that which I must tell. Doctor dear, it is *you* who are to blame. Oh, the worry of it all. It seems to take the very life out of me. I must talk," she went on, with growing excitement. "I must tell him all which he can never learn so long as you keep me silent. Send Ruxton to me, doctor dear, and give us leave to talk as much as we want to, and I promise you you shall not regret it. I—I simply must talk or—or ——"

But the growing excitement proved too much for her. In her weak state Vita suddenly fell to weeping hysterically. The nurse and doctor leant their energies to calming her, and, by degrees, their efforts were rewarded.

But the little man's face was troubled. This was what he feared, dreaded.

The moment Vita had calmed again he chided her as he might chide some helpless child, but he registered a mental resolve. Somehow Vita must obtain strength or —— Well, he had done all he knew. He must leave medicine and look to the psychological side. Experiment—he hated experiment at his time of life. But there seemed to be nothing else for it. So he reassured her and gave her the promise she asked.

The result was magical. The sick woman's face lit radiantly. Her beautiful grey eyes were filled with such a light as the little man had never seen in them before. He wondered. He was puzzled. It was something which he could not understand.

He left the room, taking the nurse with him, and as he went he shook his head and warned himself that the nervous troubles of modern times were amazing. He felt that he was professionally old—very old.

Nor was it without serious misgivings that he sought Ruxton Farlow.

For an hour Vita endured the efforts of the nurse. She endured them uncomplainingly. She felt like some small child being prepared for a party. There was the pleasant excitement of it, but, unlike the small child, there was also a dread which all the delight could not banish.

Her troubles were very real, and in the long days and nights of illness which had seriously threatened her mental balance, and the dull bodily suffering from her crushed arm, they had become exaggerated, as only acute suffering can distort such things.

With the first return to reason she had hugged to herself the one outstanding fact that the responsibility of her father's death lay at her door. It stood out startlingly from every other thought in the tangle of her poor brain. She had urged him to his death, unwittingly it is true, but due solely to the childish credulity she had displayed. Even now the unforgettable picture of that grey, lean figure falling forward in response to Von Berger's merciless gun-shot haunted her every waking moment. The horror of it, the dreadful cruelty. And all her—her doing.

At the bottom of it all lay her cowardice, her miserable cowardice. Her life—her wretched life had been threatened, and to escape death she had dragged him forth and left him at the mercy of their enemies. To her dying day the memory of it would haunt her. She knew it could never be otherwise.

But later, as slowly some strength had begun to return, an added trouble came to her. It was the natural result of convalescence. The legitimate selfish interest in life inspired it. It came at the moment when Ruxton had been permitted to pay his first brief visit. It was the sight of him which had filled her with dismay. She had suddenly remembered that to save her own life she had not only dragged her father to his death, but she had sacrificed this man's love and promised to become the wife of the detestable Von Salzinger. From that moment the little troubled doctor had noted the check against which he had been fighting ever since.

All these things were in Vita's mind now as she submitted to the attentions of her nurse. The blending of excitement and dread had been with her at first, but quickly all excitement had given way to the single emotion which grew almost to a panic, when, finally, the nurse withdrew, leaving her ready to receive the man she loved.

Vita leant against her cushions waiting breathlessly. Her courage was drawn up to an almost breaking point. She longed to re-summon the nurse, and once even her uninjured arm was outstretched towards the electric bell. But she did not ring. She had asked, nay begged for Ruxton's visit. She resolutely determined to face him and tell him all the miserable truth. He would despise her. He would turn from her. She closed her eyes to escape the picture she had conjured up of the cold look she knew his handsome dark eyes were so capable of. But he must know—he must know. She told herself this, and she told herself that she must accept her fate at his hands without murmur. It was a just punishment for her ——

The sound of the door-catch moving startled her. Her eager, frightened eyes turned swiftly in the direction. In a moment Ruxton was standing in the room, his deep eyes smiling down at her from his great height.

"Vita! My Vita!"

Just for one moment the woman's head swam. Her eyes closed and it seemed that she was about to faint. But the sensation passed, and when the beautiful grey depths gazed out once more the man was seated on the edge of the bed, holding her hand clasped under the tender pressure of both his.

"My poor little Vita! My poor darling!"

The tones of his voice were tenderly caressing. They were full of a deep, passionate sympathy and love. Vita thrilled under their echo in her own soul. But there was no return of pressure in her hand. Her eyes gazed back into his full of yearning, but they seemed to have lost their power of smiling.

"Ruxton, dear ——" she began. Then she broke off as though powerless to bring herself to tell him all that lay ready marshalled for him to hear.

"Don't distress yourself, dear. Don't bother to talk. It's enough for me to be here, with you, and know you are getting well."

It was his final words which spurred her courage. She began to speak rapidly, and almost it was as if complaint were in her tone.

"But I am not getting well—yet. That is what Doctor Mellish says, and that is why I must talk. Oh, Ruxton, can't you understand? I can never get well until I have told you—told you all that is on my mind. Dearest, dearest, I have wronged you, oh, how I have wronged you, and all because I am a coward, a miserable wretched coward who dared not face the death which they had marked out for me. It is that—that which brought about poor father's death. It is that which made me throw aside the love which was all the world to me, and promise to marry the man who pretended that he was about to save my wretched life."

"Von Salzinger?"

The question came with unerring instinct, but the coldness for herself Vita had dreaded was lacking.

"Yes," she said, in a childlike, frightened way.

"Tell it me. Tell it me all. I have been waiting all these weeks to learn the truth of all that happened to you—of all you have been made to suffer by those devils. Tell me everything, from the moment I left you to come up here to await your father's arrival."

His manner was so gentle, yet so firm. His eyes still held the warm smile with which he had greeted her. Vita's courage stole back into her veins, and her poor, hammering heart slackened its beatings, and her thoughts became less chaotic.

Ruxton waited with infinite patience. Time was for them alone just now. He had no desire to lose one moment of it.

Presently in a low hurried voice Vita began her story.

She made no attempt to convey to him the terror through which she had passed. Yet it was all there. It lay under every word she uttered. It found expression in the brilliancy of her eyes, and the heated color which leapt to her thin cheeks. Ruxton read it all as if he were witnessing the whole action of the scenes she was describing. He not only read it, but something of a sympathetic dread swept through him, and his heart set him wondering how his poor troubled love had managed to survive the horror of all she must have endured.

Vita told him of Von Berger's coming, silently, secretly to Redwithy, and the way in which he had forced her to embark on that journey over the wild moorlands into the heart of Somersetshire. Then she told him of the imprisonment in the dreadful valley. She hurried on to the scene when Von Berger had warned her of her condemnation to death. After that she paused, gathering her courage for what was next to come. Her eyes gazed yearningly into her lover's now serious face. Her courage was ebbing fast. Then came the heartening tones of his voice.

"Tell it all, dearest. You have nothing to fear. Perhaps I can guess it."

Instantly her courage rose, and she poured out the story of her renunciation of his love, that she might be permitted to live. And in her renunciation she warned him that she had been resolved to carry it out to the hideous completion of marriage with Von Salzinger.

And while she leant back on her cushions pouring out her passionate story, Ruxton's thoughts were less on her words than on the wonder at the loyalty and honesty which made it necessary for her to lay bare her very soul to him now, revealing every weakness which she believed to be hers. Its effect upon him was deep and lasting. Blame? Where could there be blame? The thought became the maddest thing in the world to him. His whole soul went out to her in her suffering. All he felt he longed to do was to place his strong arms about her and defend her from all the world; to drive off even the vaguest shadow of memory which might disturb her.

But he did nothing. Her hand lay passive in his, and he waited while she recounted the details of the night journey from Somersetshire to the North. Then, when she came to the final scene of her father's death, passion surged through his veins, and he rose from his seat on the bed and paced the limits of the room.

"The treacherous devils!" he muttered. "The hounds! Gad! they could not beat him, so they played upon a woman, a defenseless woman. It was German. But they have paid—both of them. But the old man! The pity—the pity of it. If I could only have saved him."

Ruxton was not addressing her, but Vita was following his every word. Now she caught at his final sentence.

"No one could," she said, with a deep sigh. "I led him to that place of death, as surely as ——"

"No, no, Vita! You must not say that. You are no more responsible for his death than I am. Those devils would have got him. If not in one way, then in another. He knew it. He was prepared for it. He told me himself. No, no, you did right. If there were shortcomings they were mine. I did not see far enough. Thank God, at least I contrived to save you from the fate they had prepared for you."

Vita's eyes had followed his restless movement. Now they rested upon his flushed face and hot eyes as he returned to his seat on the bed and took possession of her hand again.

"Thank God for your life and safety, dearest," he cried, raising her hand to his lips and pressing it to them passionately. "It was the nearest thing. It turns me cold now when I think how near. Listen and I'll tell you my side of it all. It's not a very brainy side, dear. There's not much in it that's particularly creditable to any thinking man. Most of it was luck, a sort of miraculous good fortune added to an inspiration for which I mustn't take any credit. I'll just take up the tale where you left it, but from the other side—the side whence you might well have expected succor, and from which, very nearly, there was none forthcoming."

He paused. He leant over on the bed, supporting himself on one arm. His dark eyes were shining as they dwelt upon the well-loved beauty of the woman who was, perhaps, at that moment, more than ever the centre of his life.

"I can't tell how I arrived at the certainty that you were in the power of these devils, and were being forced unwittingly to further their schemes. It was instinct, it was—well, whatever you like to call it. There's no need to worry you with the manner in which I persuaded your father to let me watch over him in his going from these shores. Nor does it matter the small things I prepared for that watch. I'll just tell you what happened.

"I owe a good deal to a small section of the Navy, including Sir Joseph Caistor and Sir Reginald Steele, who were both spending the week-end here. Also Commander Sparling, and some of his men, who are in charge of the new constructions at the yards. Captain Ludovic I owe something to for his shrewdness and loyalty and tolerance. These are the elements which contributed so largely in your salvation.

"Well, all day long on that Sunday a light cruiser was standing off the coast. It had definite instructions. Yes, Sir Joseph had ordered it there to help me. It was scouting for a submarine. You see, I had made up my mind that there would be a German submarine in the matter. That is to say, if my fears were to prove well founded. Sure enough one turned up late in the afternoon, and the cruiser picked her up while she was running awash. We got the signal that she'd found her. Then was played a wonderful game of cat and mouse. The cruiser never for a moment let it out of her sight. When darkness closed she just ran up closer and played about with a searchlight. There was no question of interfering with or even 'speaking' her. She was outside the three miles. Then about six o'clock there came the development. The submarine launched a boat for shore. It was well manned, and she drove away in the direction of the cove. Then the cruiser settled to her work. She turned her searchlight right on to the vessel lying awash, and never left it. The men on the submarine could do nothing which could not be seen from the cruiser, and, to make matters more exasperating, the cruiser closed right in upon her."

Ruxton paused as though reviewing and criticizing the scene, to observe the completeness of the operation.

"You must understand, dear, what was in my mind to make this necessary," he went on, seeing the need for explanation. "You see, I knew what your father's submersible meant to Germany. They had lost the plans of the U-rays lamp. Nor had they any models. The only installation of the U-rays was on the submersible. I had made up my mind that if there was to be any interference with your father they meant capturing his vessel too. Besides, it would be simple from their view-point. Your father's vessel was wholly unarmed.

"Very well. What were the intentions with a submarine probably full of German naval men? It seemed to me natural that while their boat went ashore, in pitch darkness, to take off your father, the men on the submarine would set about securing possession of the submersible the moment it hove in sight. How right I was you will see. However, the submarine never had a chance. She could not escape that light. She dived again and again to avoid it, but each time she came up the light picked her up and held her. Had they attempted to launch a boat the cruiser would have done the same, and then followed it up whithersoever it went; and, had there been an attempt to board the submersible, our boat would have been there first. The skipper of that submarine was out-manœuvred, beaten—peaceably, but—beaten. Nor had he means of communicating his trouble to those in the boat which had gone ashore."

Now Ruxton's manner become less exultant as he went on after a brief pause.

"What went on at the cove you know better than I. That was the chief weakness of my plans. I stationed a number of the confidential Government agents ready to lend help if it were needed. But I had been driven to concentrating on the ultimate 'get away.' That, to me, stood out as imperative. I had to chance the other. Therein lay my blame for the sacrifice of your father. The sound of shots fired told its tale, but I still hoped."

He drew a deep sigh of regret. His eyes were troubled. Now he went on, without a sign of elation.

"The crucial moment came when it was seen that the pinnace, loaded well down, was racing towards the submersible from the shore. It was more than ticklish. However, things were carefully planned. They hailed the submersible, which was lying awash. They found only two men on the deck—your father's men, and Captain Ludovic in the conning-tower doorway. Von Berger led the way aboard, and Von Salzinger followed. The former glanced at the men, and spoke to Ludovic. In his words he justified my whole supposition. He asked for a Lieutenant Rutter, and Ludovic, in assumed sullen submission, told him he was below in the saloon. Von Berger was satisfied. He only waited till the crew was aboard, and you, lying unconscious in the arms of one of his men, and your father's body supported by two others, had been conveyed down below. Then he gave Ludovic orders to head at full speed for Cuxhaven, and, if followed, to submerge. He said that the man Rutter would be sent up to see he played no tricks. Then he and Von Salzinger went below, and the steel door of the conning-tower was made fast.

"The rest—do you need it? It was a bloody affair. You and your dead father were taken into the saloon. Von Berger and Von Salzinger followed. Then Von Berger dismissed the men, who went out while he looked round for Rutter. But in a moment he understood what was happening. As the men left the saloon they were set upon. They fought like demons, but were either overpowered or shot down. Von Berger slammed the saloon door closed, and strove to hold it. But as well try to hold a rabbit-hutch against a tornado. They were caught. Caught, as I heard Von Salzinger say, like rats in a trap."

"You—you were there—in the submersible?"

Vita's eyes were shining with a world of emotion. The story had caught her and swept her along with it. A great pride was in her heart. This man had risked all, everything for her father and herself.

"Oh, yes. But I wasn't by any means alone. Young Sparling and twenty of his bluejackets from the yards had been secreted aboard. But—it was deadly work. How I escaped without a scratch I don't know. Five of our men got wounded. Von Berger fought like a fury. The other, Von Salzinger, went out suddenly at the outset. I'm not sure who brought him down. Sparling and I fired simultaneously. I hope it was my shot that sent him—home. But Von Berger was wonderful. It was not until we had crushed his wrist and hand in the fighting that he was overpowered. He was a veritable Hercules."

Vita had listened almost breathlessly. Now her enquiry came in a low, eager tone.

"And Von Berger—what happened after he was overpowered?"

Ruxton hesitated.

"It was he who killed my father," Vita reminded him.

"Yes."

"Tell me."

Ruxton had no alternative.

"We had a talk—he and I. The result? He was given an alternative. The hangman's rope here ashore, or half an hour's freedom of the submersible's deck."

Vita nodded. She understood.

"And he chose?"

"The deck. You see he was a royal prince."

"Yes."

Neither seemed inclined to break the silence that followed. Each was thinking of the scenes which must have been enacted. Ruxton, as he had witnessed them. Vita, as her imagination portrayed them.

Finally it was Vita who spoke in a whisper that became almost startling.

"The others—the crew of the boat?"

"They have been all sent back to Germany—via Holland. They were all held here till the wounded had recovered. Then they went away together."

But Vita's eyes were wide with apprehension.

"But the secret. The secret of it all will reach Berlin. It will reach even to ——"

Ruxton smiled.

"Precisely what was intended and—hoped. It has done so. We know that. We have had the most curious and subtle enquiries from the Berlin authorities. They dared not openly accuse. We have replied. Our Foreign Office formulated the reply. They have been told that a murder was committed upon the Yorkshire coast—the murder of a German named Von Hertzwohl. It was committed by a rascally crew of Germans, headed by one, Von Berger, and assisted by another, Von Salzinger.

These seem to have been the names they were known by, though the police think they were probably aliases. Unfortunately the gang got away in boats. However, the leaders came to an untimely end in the pursuit by the police. One shot himself—the one called Von Salzinger. The other, Von Berger, who seems to have been injured, tried to escape by going overboard from the boat in which he was endeavoring to get away. The Foreign Office has regretted that it can obtain no further information which might be of use to Berlin."

"But it is a challenge," cried Vita in an awed voice.

Ruxton's smile broadened.

"So it was intended." He shook his head. "But it is a challenge they dare not take up. Furthermore, it should leave us in peace to complete the work your poor father has so well begun."

Ruxton rose from his seat on the bed. He moved away, across to the leaded window, from which the sunbeam had long since passed. He gazed out across the leafless trees of the park towards the drab of the moorland beyond. He was not unaffected by his own story. He knew how much more it must mean to Vita. He waited. He was waiting for a summons which he felt would come in Vita's own good time.

A few minutes passed and then it came. He turned about and smiled over at the sweet grey eyes which were so frankly appealing. There was a change, a great change in them. All the trouble seemed to have passed out of them. And the weary brain behind them seemed at last to have found that rest it so seriously needed.

"Ruxton," she murmured. "Can you—can you ever forgive me for—what ——"

The man was at the bedside again. This time he was not sitting. He was leaning across it, and his arms were outstretched and thrust about her soft, warm body, where she leant against the cushions. His face was drawn up within a few inches of hers. His eyes were on a level with hers. They were smiling into the deeps of grey beauty before them. Nay, the tragedy of it, he was laughing into them.

" Promising to marry Von Salzinger ? If I had been in your place I shouldn't have promised. I'd have married him right off if it were to save me from being murdered." Then his laugh died out abruptly. " Don't think of it, my beautiful Vita. Don't ever let the thought of it enter your dear, dear head again. If ever a poor defenceless woman went through an earthly hell, you did. Sweetheart, it's my sole purpose in life now to endeavor to place you in an earthly heaven."

He drew her to him in a passionate embrace. And so their lips met and lingered.

CHAPTER XXXI

AFTER TWELVE MONTHS

THE shock which electrified London was reminiscent of the shocks to which it was submitted in the early days of the war, when the "Yellow" press ran riot, and journalists dipped deeply into their reservoirs of superlatives to generate the current of sensation which should sell their papers.

It was a misty afternoon, with an almost intangible yet saturating drizzle; a setting admirably fitting an evening newspaper thrill. Spirits were at a sufficiently low ebb for something of a screaming nature. Fleet Street did its best; a best at no time to be despised.

It came as the homeward rush began from the offices of the great metropolis. It stared out from street corners and the fronting of bookstalls. It looked up from the greasy pavements. It served to hide a portion of the rags which hung about the nether limbs of small street urchins. It came in strident, raucous tones upon the moisture-laden atmosphere. There was no escaping it. That which escaped the eyes thrust itself upon defenceless ear. And its urgent note created the necessary excitement in minds set upon the task of making the homeward journey with the least possible delay.

Then, at once, the careless eye was caught and held. "Under Water: The World Defied," cried one contents bill. "The New Submersible Merchantman," announced one of the more sedate journals. "The Great Problem Solved," cryptically suggested a buff-tinted sheet. "From Downing Street to the Deeps," smiled the more flippant pink announcement. And so on through the whole jargon of the press poster. There was no escape from it. The word "submersible" seemed to fill the whole of the wretched winter atmosphere. And, as was intended, it caught the London fancy, and deflected purpose into the channel it desired.

London was startled; and when London is startled by its press it is no niggard. Therefore the rain of coppers which set in became perilously near a deluge. The small boys snatched, and the old sinners with grey whiskers and weather-stained faces swept in their harvest. The bookstall attendants dealt out their papers in a steady, accurate stream, and, within an hour, the whole of London's democracy had formulated its definite opinion upon the new adventure, in the dogmatic manner of the British ratepayer.

Strange and mixed were many of the opinions which flew from lip to lip in the overcrowded homeward bound trains and 'buses. True, there were many who read the well-told story of the skilful journalist as they might read a sensational tale in a sixpenny magazine. They enjoyed it. They devoured it hungrily. Then they passed on to the sports page, and considered the doings of their favorites in the sporting world. But the suburban ratepayer, the householder whose responsibilities left him no alternative but to take himself seriously, was of a different calibre. He possesses to the full the stolid, fault-finding mind of the British race. He is as full of prejudice as the egg is supposed to be full of meat. He is ready at all times to hurl blame and anathema at the heads of those who conspire to extract from his pocket the necessary funds to contrive that he shall live in security and comfort in his home. He is the victim of a splendid pessimism for all things except his summer holiday. His opinions come like a shot from a gun.

He read with incredulity until he arrived at the point where he felt righteously he could open afresh the rut of his ever-ready disapproval. Then the full force of what he read percolated heavily through his fog of prejudiced incredulity, and virtuous indignation supervened.

"What was this absurd nonsense? Who ever heard of submersible merchantmen? What fresh folly of the Government was coming now? The Prime Minister on the trial trip. Why the devil didn't he stick to his job in Downing Street? The moment these fellows got their five thousand a year they didn't care a hang for the country. Playing about with these toys of some crazy inventor. It made one sick. Anyway, if the Government were concerned in the scheme, why was it kept secret? Why wasn't the taxpayer told of it? Who was making the money out of it? Somebody. There was always graft in these secret things. There was too much of this hole-in-the-corner business—entirely too much. Altogether too much disregard for the liberty of the subject," etc., etc.

But the Fleet Street chorus of "epochs" and "masterly moves" and "strokes of statesmanship" found an abiding echo amongst the optimists. They saw, with eyes wide open, that which they read. There was no grumble in them. Why should there be? That which they read told them clearly of success. It told them that never again would Britain's overseas commerce be placed in jeopardy from enemy attack in time of war; that is, if British enterprise would only rise to the opportunity afforded. That was simple enough. Of course the shipowners would see their advantage. Germany—pah!

The men who personally felt aggrieved, however, were the professional politicians and the private Member. These men were seriously perturbed. Here was real limelight, and they were not in it! Horrible thought! Their course lay clearly before them. An attack upon inoffensive paper, by a pen, erroneously believed to be mightier than the sword, was their only hope of making up leeway. So those who had sufficient influence hurled broadcast the next morning, in their favorite daily papers, a wealth of ill-considered and valueless criticism and opinion of something which they were splendidly incompetent to judge.

And the cause of all the sensation? It was so small an incident, and yet so tremendous in its omen for the future. Just the story of a number of eminent men, Cabinet Ministers, naval and army men, and one or two great ship-builders, running a blockade of warships, and successfully shipping a cargo of pretended contraband of war from Dundee to Gravesend. The game had been played in deadly earnest. It was a test trip for a new type of submersible cargo and passenger vessel, pitting its powers against the concentrated might of a large squadron of the British Navy. It was a test of efficiency. The details were simple in the extreme. The laden vessel, carrying a thousand tons of merchandise and its burden of passengers, was lying at Dundee. Outside, watching and waiting for its appearance on the high seas, lay a powerful squadron of the British Navy. The rules laid down were that the submersible should make its way to Gravesend, and the naval squadron, under war conditions, was to capture it, or place it in such a position as to be sinkable, by any means in its power, at any point upon its journey.

The result. With all the skill and power at its command the great surface squadron had proved its helplessness. The submersible had slipped out of port under cover of darkness, and from that moment, until its arrival at Gravesend, the seas had been scoured vainly for so much as a sight of it.

It was a tremendous thought. It was a splendid victory for the pacifist hope. The dead Polish inventor had been justified beyond all question. Never had the word "epoch," such as Fleet Street loves, been better used. It was such a moment that those who made the secret journey, and witnessed the capabilities of the vessel which had been built at the Dorby yards, were flung back from all preconceived convictions of maritime affairs, established during the war, to imaginative speculation upon the vista of progress now opened up.

Not a man of them, from the Prime Minister of England down to the junior lieutenant upon the vainly striving fleet of war-vessels, but realized a picture of the doom of the magnificent and costly super-Dreadnought as the pillar of might upon which naval power must rest. Its proud office gone, it appeared to them as little greater than a means of defence against the landing of hostile man power upon Britain's vulnerable shores. The proud queens of the sea must pass from their exalted thrones to a lesser degree in naval armaments.

Nor was the realization without pity and regret. How could it be otherwise in the human heart which ever worships the actual display of might? It almost seemed as if the world had been suddenly given over to topsyturveydom.

The facts, however, were irrefutable. As in the dim past the troublous surface of the seas had been conquered by the intrepid and skilful mariner, now at last the devious submarine channels had been turned into an almost equally secure highway of traffic by the inventor. The march of progress was continuing. It was invention triumphant. The world's sea-borne commerce was secured. It was held safe from enemy war-craft in the future. Therefore the doom of the proud battleship had been sounded.

Some day, perhaps, a new weapon would be achieved. Some day, perhaps, even the channels of the dark waters would be rendered insecure by the hand that had now made them safe. For the present, however, and probably for years to come, the sea-borne food supplies of Britain stood in no position of jeopardy.

It was well past midnight. The house in Smith Square quite suddenly displayed renewed signs of life. A closed motor had driven up, paused, and then passed on. Then appeared many lights behind the small-paned Georgian windows.

Ruxton Farlow had returned home with his wife after a strenuous and exciting day; and with them was their devoted Yorkshire father, burning with the sense of a great triumph for his beloved son, and his almost equally beloved daughter.

Their journey from Gravesend earlier in the evening had been broken that they might attend an informal dinner-party at Downing Street. It was a function entirely in honor of the masters of Dorby; and it had been arranged that Ruxton's colleagues in the country's Cabinet might tender their sincere congratulations and thanks for the work which he, and his father, and his wife had achieved privately in their country's cause.

It was over; and all three were relieved and thankful. But the note of triumph surging through their hearts was still dominant. Scarcely a word had passed between them in the brief run from Downing Street to Smith Square. Their hearts were as yet too full, and the memory of the words addressed to them by Sir Meeston and his colleagues was still too poignant to permit of normal conditions. Vita had leant back in the car, with her husband's arm linked through hers, and one of his powerful hands clasped in hers. She sat thus with thought teeming, and a heart thrilling with an unspeakable joy, and happiness, and triumph, all for the man at her side. Her own share in the events through which they had passed was entirely forgotten by her. This man at her side filled her whole focus. He was all in all to her, as she felt he was all in all to the cause in which they had worked.

It was perhaps the profoundest and proudest moment of her life. It was a moment of perfect happiness. All she had ever dreamed of was hers; and the hand of the man she worshipped was even now, warm and strong, clasped tightly in her own. Hers to keep; hers to lean on; hers never to yield so long as their lives should last.

In the house they passed up into the small drawing-room, and, for a few moments, they sat there before retiring. Slowly the spell of the day's events fell from them. It was finally Sir Andrew who released them from it.

He gazed across at Vita with twinkling eyes. His smile was full of kindly tenderness.

"Now, perhaps, I shall have time to appreciate the fact that at last I am the happy possessor of a beautiful daughter as well as a headstrong son," he said. Then, after the briefest hesitation: "Vita, my dear," he went on, in his old-fashioned manner, while his gaze took in the radiant beauty turned abruptly towards him, "it seems to me that the most wonderful thing in the world has happened to me. The long, lonely life seems to have entirely passed. I mean the loneliness which only a man can feel who is deprived for all time of the association of his own womankind. Now at last I can draw deep comfort from the reflection of Ruxton's happiness. Now, however slight my claim, I can nevertheless *claim* something of a woman's filial regard. The grey of life has been tinted for me since you have chosen to make my boy happy, and as time goes on I can see that tint develop into the roseate hue of a happiness I somehow never thought to feel again. Bless you, my dear, for coming into an old man's life; and you, too, my boy," he went on, turning to the smiling Ruxton, "for having given me such a daughter. I feel this is the moment for saying this. The work is done now in workmanlike fashion, and the little triumph of it all makes me want to tell you of this thing that I feel."

Vita impulsively left her husband's side. She rose from the settee and crossed over to her second father and held out both her hands.

"You have made it difficult for me to say a word ——" she began, smiling down upon him with her glorious eyes. Then she seemed to become speechless.

The oriflamme of her red-gold hair shone with a delicious burnish under the shaded electric light. Her flushed oval cheek glowed with a suggestion of thrilling happiness. The old man caught and held her hands, and, the next moment, she had bent her slimly graceful body and impressed upon his rugged cheek a kiss of deep affection.

Still she remained speechless, and she turned and glanced with dewy eyes in appeal to the great husband looking on.

"Won't you help me?" she demanded wistfully.

Ruxton laughed happily.

"Help?" he said quickly. Then he shook his head. "No, no. You don't need any help. Just tell him what you once told me. You remember." His eyes became serious. "You said 'I love him almost as if he were really my own father.' He won't need more."

And Vita obeyed him, reciting the words almost like some child. But she meant them, and felt them, and at the last word her glance was full of a whimsical light as she added of her own initiative —

"And aren't you two dears going to smoke?"

Half an hour later the two men were sitting alone in Ruxton's study. The smoke of their cigars hung heavily upon the air of the room. There had come a moment of profound silence between them. They had talked of the happenings of that day: of the test of their new submersible: its simple triumph, and all it meant in the cause of humanity, of that progress towards a lasting peace among nations which mankind was yearning to achieve.

Each man had offered his own view-point for discussion, and it seemed as if the last word had at length been spoken. But they sat on in silence, and Sir Andrew watched the reflective eyes of his idealist son. He was speculating as to what deep thought still lay unvoiced behind them, and he urged him.

"Well, boy? It has been a long day. Is it bed? Or are you going to put into words that dream I see moving behind your eyes?"

Ruxton broke into a short, nervous laugh which died out with a curious, sober abruptness.

"Dreams, dreams? I wonder if they are only dreams. If they are dreams they are surely vivid enough—painfully vivid." He paused for an infinitesimal fraction. "No, no, Dad, I am no visionary in the sense that imagination runs away with me. I see many things that every other man sees, and it is only a question of different reading. What do you think the majority of people in this country will do when they really understand all that our little adventure means? They will metaphorically fling up their hats, and deride the wretched Teuton, and his merciless delight in the slaughter of innocent life upon the high seas. In a few years' time, when they see our sea-borne traffic carried by great submersibles of eight and ten thousand tons, their confidence will be unbounded, and they will reiterate again the old song 'Britannia Rules the Waves,' and—they will have justice on their side. But the questions which I ask myself, which I must keep on asking myself, are—'Does Britannia rule the waves? Can she continue to rule the waves?'"

He shook his head, and gently removed the ash from his cigar.

"In spite of all the evidence, in spite of our wholly promising new move for protecting our overseas traffic, in spite of the brilliant manner in which our Navy has met, and defeated, every ingenious method of attack by our enemies in the past, I do not believe we can ever hope to continue indefinitely our rule of the seas, or *even the safeguarding of our overseas traffic.*

"Oh, yes, I know what everybody will say in answer to such a statement," he went on, in reply to the interrogatory in his father's eyes. "But they are wrong, a thousand times wrong," he declared, almost passionately. "It is no sound argument or real logic that what we have done for the past few hundred years we can continue to do. Our men are giants among the men of the sea. But they are only human. The days of 'wait and see' are over. We must not wait for trouble to arise to attempt its counter. We must look ahead with all the experience of the late war behind us. The reason we rule the seas at the moment—if we do rule them—is because we are an island country, and because our past necessities have forced us to stride far ahead in maritime affairs of all other nations, while they possessed no full realization of the value of sea power. But the late war has shown us that now, at last, every country in the world understands to the full the necessity for wresting from any one Power the dominance of the seas. Look back. Germany was fighting for sea power as greatly as she was fighting for anything else. Russia, that vast land-locked world, could only hope for an outlet to the sea as a result of all her sacrifice. The Balkan countries, their national aspirations, every one of them was a harbor on the high seas. The whole world intends to possess each its share of the great waterways, without fear of the dominance of any one nation. It is plain, plain as the writing on the wall.

"I solemnly submit that Britain's power, her domination of the seas, cannot stand for all time. And the reason—it is so simple, so terribly simple. Just as our strength now lies in the seas, so does our weakness. Every moment of our lives the threat of starvation stares into our haunted eyes, and we, like hunted men, search and search for a means to ward it off. Do you see? I could weep for those who will not see. The Germans were just not clever enough, that is all. They saw the weakened links in our armor, and endeavored to drive home the attack when they attempted their submarine blockade. But their attempt lacked adequate preparation. This is all ancient history, but it points in the direction I would have men look. The result of that has been to make us further consolidate our defences. The completion of that comes in our new submersible. But, remember, we are defending only against known forces—not the unknown. It is the unknown we have to fear. Every human defence can be destroyed by human ingenuity. That is why I say that the new principle will only serve us in itself for just the amount of time which it takes our rivals to readjust their focus, and mobilize their powers of offence. The day will come when some invention will be brought to attack underwater craft successfully. And then—what then? In spite of all our territory, our wealth, our nominal power we shall be driven to yield to the pangs of hunger.

It is not a dream I am showing you. It is a reality. It is a truism which no logical mind can deny."

Sir Andrew refrained from comment for some moments as his son ceased speaking. But at last, as the silence prolonged, he urged him.

"And what is the answer to it all?" he enquired. His eyes were serious, and his words came crisply. He had caught something of his boy's gravity although he was not sure how far he accepted his creed. "There must be an answer. Every problem of State possesses its solution, if we can only find it—in time."

Ruxton nodded. Then he rose abruptly from his chair and flung his cigar-end into the empty fireplace with a forceful gesture. He began to pace the room.

"That is the crux of the whole situation," he declared feverishly, his dark eyes burning with an intense light. "In time! In time! If we could only be induced to adopt the true solution 'in time'—before we are forced to adopt it. Oh, yes, there is a solution—a right solution. It is so simple that one wonders it has not long since been discussed by every man in the street. The solution stares us in the face on every hand. It calls aloud to us in appeal, and we turn from it. Every country that can ever hope to last out the days of man must be self-contained, self-supporting. In times of stress it must be capable of existence upon its own natural stores. Look at America's position during the war. She could afford to hold aloof, and continue her reign of prosperity while she snapped her fingers at Armageddon. Why? Because she was independent of the rest of the world both economically and strategically. Let the whole of the rest of the world blaze. Let the slaughter go on. She could stand alone though the conflagration raged a century. No combination of human forces could defeat America without exterminating her peoples. Here are we, with territory, blocks of territory scattered throughout the world so vast as to make America look small in comparison. They are not tracts of savage country, but cultivated and highly civilized States, any one of which can be wholly self-supporting. They are ours—peopled with our people—governed by codes of laws similar to our own—with objects and principles like to our own. And yet we sit here awaiting ultimate destruction, a tiny group of islands upon the crests of the Atlantic waters. It makes one think of the foolish bird, who builds her nest and stocks it full of eggs, and sets it upon the topmost twigs of a tree, waiting for the gathering of the storm which must sweep it out of existence, while the whole protection of the tree's full strength lies open to her. The position is so absurd as to set one laughing in very bitterness. I tell you the day will come when an island home is utterly untenable for any great nation. I am not even sure that the time has not already come. If I had my way our empire would be ruled from the heart of Canada, whose vast tracts of territory are bursting with an unbroached wealth which no country in the world can ever hope to match. There, amidst those fertile plains, I would set up our kingdom, and gather our limitless resources about us. There, in the midst of that new world, I would wield me the sceptre of the greatest Empire of all time, and within its ramparts I would strive unceasingly for the spiritual and mundane welfare of our people and all mankind. No nation in the world was ever more fitted, both in temper and in power, for the task. No peoples would more willingly lend themselves to it. All our history has been one long story of pacific purpose, and only has our regrettable geographical setting forced upon us any other course. My most ardent thought and desire is that some day we may voluntarily remove the obstacles besetting us, and our pacific purpose may be given the full development it seeks. But so long as Britain nests upon the waters of the Atlantic, so long shall we continue to live under the burden of war. And the end?—Who can prophesy the—end?"

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